DISTANCES

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I provide in my preface a brief account of my development as a creative writer. Through this development I draw an analogy to the evolution of modern science by stating that my need for personal clarity is analogous to the charge for empirical clarity of modern science. Furthermore, I contrast the objectivism of modern science to the subjectivism of creative writing.

The four short stories in my thesis range from a semi-autobiographical story, to two short stories that stem out further and further from the subjective origin of the first story. The story of greatest distance is “Fireflies,” which is not semi-autobiographical, but pure fiction. The final short story returns to the subjective origin of the first. The drive of Distances is thereby to create a sort parabola: a subjective, semi-autobiographical origin, to an objective, purely fictional crest, then a return to that subjective, semi-autobiographical origin. The entire collection is a holistic, ultimately subjective, and therefore personal experience; yet, through the use certain tropes,—metaphors others can relate to, the stories are paradoxically sharable.

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PART I

PREFACE

When I was a child there was an old condemned warehouse at the end of the street where we lived. After school, I'd run by it as fast as I could, afraid something might jump out of a dark space and get me. Sundays, when I went to Mass, I learned about Heaven and Hell, and at night, when I lay awake in bed, after saying my prayers, I thought about that warehouse and how it must be everything other than Heaven, and maybe, closer to Hell. I had terrible nightmares. Sometimes they were so bad I wouldn't sleep for days, in fear of having that same nightmare. Finally, I decided what to do: I had to go into that warehouse. From then on my main goal in life would be to face every fear. Eventually, I stopped going to church. I discovered science. In science I could finally destroy all those things that made me afraid of the dark. I'd learn that there were no monsters waiting to get me, and that fear was nothing more than the unknown.

When I grew up, I wanted to be a psychologist. I'd bring that darkness, that place where the unknown waits, into the light through science. Science would allow me to put words to what frightened me. Psychology seemed like a logical extension to that drive for personal clarity. But while studying psychology I discovered something: I'd gotten rid of the nightmares, but in the process, I'd gotten rid of all my dreams. I'd pushed that mysterious part of myself to the side so I could have some peace of mind, but eventually, I dreamt nothing at all. While studying the history of psychology, I learned that psychology had been mistakenly put with the sciences, and that in fact, psychology was the leftover of centuries of scientific reductionism, of codifying the material world. The psyche, if such a thing exists, could never lend itself to empiricism, for it isn't material and easy to observe in a linear, cause and effect way. The psychologist would have to limit his or her data to the observable, and therefore, reducible. Is that not what I

did to my nightmares, pushed them to the side for the sake of clarity, to reduce what frightened me to the material world, and in the process, destroy what I didn't understand?

I left psychology because I was interested in exploring that warehouse, that dark place where my fears reside. I went to the literature department hoping that there I would find the freedom to do so. The arts have always served the function of expressing what is hidden, the complexities of thought and emotion. The workings of the psyche are at best observed through the arts, for the arts, like dreams themselves, allow us the freedom to break away from the constraints of the demonstrative world. When I was a child, I found that freedom through playing music. Eventually, I'd want to take my music and tell a story. Poetry was a step away from music, less constrained to the traditional rhythmic progressions of key and tempo, therefore allowing more freedom to explore. But poetry didn't allow me the freedom I wanted to tell a story. So instead of becoming a folk singer, I decided to try fiction. Prose, with the ability it gave me to be rhythmic or not, and in the process, tell a story, would be a way to create a space within which I could expand from my living, demonstrative experiences, and simply enough, use my imagination. I discovered that literature picked up where science left off, that literature, like the illusive fabric of dreams, was everything that had been pushed to the side since the scientific revolution, or in my little world, since I ventured into that warehouse. I finished my degree in psychology, but after that, science would lose its clarity, for it didn't allow me the freedom I needed to extend beyond myself, and perhaps through that extension, dream again.

I found that once my writing was developed and sharable to the reader, I could illuminate the dark places of the world with language, with my personal science; moreover, I could appeal to the reader's deeper needs: those things that don't necessarily make you see, but make you feel. In concordance with exploring that dark place, I could tell the stories that lay in the dark; I could tell the stories we usually don't read about. Josie, in "There Were No Falls in Fall City," in addition to his multiple layers of conflict: ethnic conflicts, gender conflicts (with regards to his female dominated family), and ultimately, the fundamental conflict between life and death, he's a boy from a new demographic: people who do not conveniently fit into a genus-specific category, not specifically Mexican-American, but somewhere in that vague space where the discourse we use to define ethnicity in America, in this case, in the Southwest, falls short. Walton, in "Brown," is also from that demographic. He is Josie all grown up, Josie in a world not ready for him. These two stories ("Fall City" more than "Brown") as well as the last story, "Too Close to Home," are based upon my personal experiences. I felt I had something to offer, that there was a certain dark space open within the common discourse that I could illuminate with my personal stories. The poetry at the end of the collection was added, not specifically to go along with the short stories, but to bring variety to the collection. The fiction is the primary focus, for I've invested the most in the fiction. However, the poetry does, to some extent, go with the fiction. The third story, "Fireflies," is different from the other stories, and it also provides the collection with a certain sense of variety. But moreover, "Fireflies" was added to the collection to show my ability to write about things divorced from my personal experience, to show my abilities as a fiction writer.

All the stories in this collection, except for “Fireflies,” are in first person. I believe there are certain steps one takes away from one’s self when writing. The “I” voice is the most natural, for that is how we address ourselves. We begin with our experiences in the world, and then elaborate from them. Fictionalizing and elaborating from certain events is the only way we can give meaning to our lives, and most importantly, to the events that seem entirely out of nothing, such as the death of a loved-one. When writing, “There Were No Falls in Fall City,” my initial experiences were the empirical, demonstrative experiences; those experiences that happened in the past and I now have the freedom to reconstruct and manipulate in a purposeful way. I found through the process of reconstructing my youth, by shifting certain events around, that I could see things anew, and through that renewal the meaninglessness of certain events, such as the death of a loved-one, could be given meaning through the recreating of certain lessons about life and death that when I was child, had no further meaning than the childish fears of a ten-year-old boy. This realization is enlightenment. This enlightenment, as it does in psychotherapy, is combined with a catharsis, an over-flowing of emotion that also gives further meaning to those meaningless, random acts of “reality.”

Having my personal experiences to draw upon, and then putting the narrator in a past reflective voice, “There Were No Falls in Fall City” developed quite naturally; but of course there was one thing missing, and that was the ending. The traditional story has an ending: the protagonist has an objective, and the development of the story is the pursuit of that objective – the resolution of the story, a climax, a definitive ending. A definitive ending brings order to the usual chaos that may construct one’s life. Moreover,

the traditional ending provides the reader with a sense of oneness, a feeling that their effort at reading the thing was not without value. However, when dealing with the chaotic elements of one's life, the ending may seem harder to construct, simply because, in reality, when at our innocent state of becoming, we are rather aimless. So to compensate for the lack of an ending, or should I say, an ending that may harder to see in the traditional sense, I developed a frame around the story. I had my persona, Josie, traveling from San Antonio to Corpus Christi for a reason to be disclosed at the end. The story would then be grounded in time with a sense of being driven from beginning to end. I got to have it both ways: to tell a story about the chaos of real life, but deliver it in a traditional, linear fashion. So that the collection may have a feeling of wholeness, I put "Too Close to Home" at the end of the collection. This story is connected to "Fall City," and by having the two at either ends of the collection, I thought it may serve the same function for the collection as a whole as the frame in "Fall City" does. Furthermore, "Too Close To Home" would answer many of the questions I left open in "Fall City."

"Brown," the second story in the collection, is a further step away from my living, empirical experiences. Much of the character traits of Walton are my own, as well as his life experiences. The location, the island he lives on, his married life and its relationship to his family, are more or less pieces of things I've experienced mixed together to construct an artificial backdrop. Walton's story is in many ways a parallel universe to my own life: what my life would be like if certain things had happened in different ways. However, by stepping further away from my experiences in the world, I felt a strange tension between the experiences I've had, and those I've invented. The tension was between my need to be autobiographical, and the need to extend beyond

autobiography. When writing an autobiography, or in the case of “Fall City,” a semi-autobiography, I would have the power of refection; I could simply tell true stories about myself, and then fictionalize certain things. With “Brown,” I wanted to write a purely fictional story, but I also wanted to compose the story of things I’ve experienced. So autobiography would extend from the fictional, just the inverse of “Fall City,” where the fictional extends from the autobiography. Walton’s story is a sort of matrix where I can mix reality with fiction, but I’d have to compromise what makes me what I am, and, as it were, step out of myself. So in order to regain some of what I had compromised, I would, for example, write in a first person voice so Walton would have the freedom to construct his environment, in much the same way I the author would have by using the “I” voice. Furthermore, throughout a great deal of the story Walton speaks in the present tense; he doesn’t simply tell a story, but narrates in a present and spontaneous way. This spontaneity reflects a living experience; in this way, I hoped to put the reader behind the eyes of Walton, to make the act of reading his story a bodily experience. “Brown” would be an opportunity to step out of myself, but I would try to keep the narrator grounded in a bodily, living experience.

A subjective voice in the present tense can only appear to be without purpose, a wondering spirit through a world of happenstance. I hoped that through the use of metaphors and other tropes, for example, the recurrence of the certain colors, Walton’s thoughts would be grounded in the physical world, and therefore, he would appear to have purpose. Furthermore, instead of investing my language in a definitive ending, an investment I believed would compromise Walton’s place in the now, I’d supplement that goal by investing in the tropes I’d developed at the beginning of the story: the maternal

nature of the washing machine; the sound it makes and how it reminds him of the ocean; the hate he feels and how the ocean symbolizes that feeling – under trough – as it were. Furthermore, through the use of these tropes, I could also provide the reader with a sense of continuity from one scene to the other, and in this way, carry the reader through the story from beginning to end. Typically, that is the function of a plot or story-line: to carry the reader from the beginning to the end. In this way, the author invests in a foreseeable objective, an outcome the reader can (not too overtly) expect. So as with "Fall City" and the use of the frame, with "Brown," I hoped these tropes would provide the story with a structure, with something external that might hold it together and lead the reader from one end to the other. This is not to say "Brown" has no plot, or that other stories that follow this approach are without a plot, but that by investing in tropes the conclusion of the story may come upon the reader much more naturally, and not formulaically as with certain genre fiction where the progression of the story is driven on plot alone, and less on character development.

Through the development of these tropes, Walton and his seemingly meaningless existence are given a discourse, a language that transfers his thoughts and feelings to the reader; and maybe the reader will relate to that discourse, will empathize with Walton. This empathy, I believe, stems from binding certain immaterial concepts, such as complex ideas and emotions, with these tropes, these material objects, that for certain reasons, whether they be scientific or philosophical, people from different backgrounds, from different cultural contingencies, can relate to, in a closer, but of course not, definitively, universal manner. It would seem that a successful story does just that: it strives for the universal, but nonetheless, fails, for we are, in all reality, alone.

But story-telling has the ability of bringing us together, of crossing the boundary between subject and object, between us and the outside world. Through this process of grounding immaterial concepts to the material world, of my subjective experiences to an objective world, that I, in my experience with the world, is at best touched narrowly, I hoped the story would unfold organically and not feel pushed or pulled toward some synthetic sense of wholeness – a sense of universality that is inauthentic – that the reader will not empathize with, but rather shun as an incomplete story. When we leave Walton, we leave him as we would any normal person, with uncertainty, and without doubt, some readers, readers that look for an overt plot when they read, will perceive the ending of "Brown" as anticlimactic; that climax, I believe, is bound to certain cultural expectations that a story must have a product, a definitive ending, in much the same sense genre fiction has a definitive ending, a climax, or a product – an action, description, or perhaps, dialogue, that ties everything together in the end.

"Fireflies," the third story in the collection, was an effort to see how far I could step away from myself. Not only did I create characters that are entirely divorced from my personal experiences, a Marine and his first encounter with his illegitimate son, I constructed a setting separated from my personal experiences: the rural landscape of West Texas, and the Marine base on Parris Island. "Fireflies," because it is not in first person, is less concerned with subjective construction, and more concerned with how the primary perspective, Chris's perspective, is constructed from the outside, not internally, as with Josie and Walton. Walton and Josie are very much so in a state of being, in static state that provides them with the ability to manipulate their surroundings, and not be under the rule of their surroundings, as would be the case in a state of flux,

or becoming. A state becoming suggests that the protagonist/narrator is undergoing a process. Initially, Chris is a sort of blank slate, and he accumulates all the elements of his existence, till in the end, he has developed a sense of self-knowledge, not unlike the self-knowledge Josie and Walton enjoy. Chris is not in the driver seat, but rather at the will of the powers that have put him in the world. Josie and Walton, through their subjective voices, have the ability to change the world around them, to actively modify what threatens to modify them. Chris, on the other hand, through his close, third person voice, is in an act of becoming, is accumulating the pieces of his outside world, while for the former two characters, those pieces are already there for the manipulation. In this act of becoming, the function of the trope that was important for Walton, falls into the background; the primary focus is on a gradual accumulation of certain pieces of information about Chris's past; in the end these pieces come together to provide the reader with the complete story of who Chris is, and where, and what, he comes from. This gradual accumulation can only denote a process, and that process can only denote a plot, which in turn denotes a definitive ending. "Fireflies," I believe, makes up where the other two stories fall short; it is a story in the traditional sense, with a beginning, middle, and end.

In "Fireflies," by stepping away from the easy "I" voice, not only was I able to allow for a plurality of perspectives, but I made a break from myself, from those personal empirical experiences that have accumulated throughout my life and have helped to develop my sense of self. Through this act I worked against my natural inclinations: instead of writing what I know, I attempted to write what was unfamiliar. I worked towards separating myself from my work, and the following challenge of having that

distance, that negation of self, and yet creating genuine characters, characters that didn't seem flat, would be difficult. All I had to work with were characters and places that are almost completely synthetic to me. Through the use of synthetic elements, combined with a third person narrator, I would step further out of myself, step out on a limb, and thereby, so to speak, flex my writer wings. This freedom is entirely divorced from anything natural: no one speaks in the third person; no one, unless he or she is a compulsive liar, tells stories that are not true. Yet despite this distance, even though I'd completely broken from my living experiences, I'd continue to work with many of the themes I'd worked with in the other two stories: men and how they relate to their families; love and sex; freedom and domestic constraints; infidelity. So, even though I'd broken away from myself, those livings experiences that construct my personality are yet a constructing force in my writing. Beginning with "There Were No Falls In Fall City," and gradually stretching out from myself, from "Brown" to "Fireflies," and then back to ground level with "Too Close to Home," I hoped the collection would form a sort of parabola where the intersection of x and y at zero is my living self, and that by incorporating my living self in the collection, the reader would be left with a sense of genuine wholeness; this is a wholeness that is difficult to define, for it eludes scientific, reductive discourse; it is the final frontier of scientific discourse: the science of the self.

This preface, as any other, is an effort to illuminate the dark places of the world, a need to make everything as clear as possible. This moment in my life, this threshold in my education, demanded that I conform, that I bring my work, ultimately, myself, my thoughts and feelings, my personality, into the light as much as possible. But the best I can hope for is not that the reader sees me clearly, but that I can reflect something onto

the reader, and in effect, reveal some fundamental, internal element, that the reader might not realize was even there, some thought, emotion, fear, sadness, that the reader wouldn't even admit to him or herself. Only then will my writing be meaningful.

PART II

STORIES

There Were No Falls in Fall City

I was making my yearly trip to Corpus when I passed by that sign:

Fall City 60 miles

It's 150 miles between San Antonio and Corpus Christi, and whenever I see that sign, I have a lot of time to think.

I thought of turning on the radio, but I didn't.

The scenery didn't help much. It all looked the same. The only thing different that could possibly catch my eye was the latest roadside memorial.

Again, I thought of turning on the radio.

The crudely constructed cross. Old family photos, frames dug into the earth among the weeds, surrounded by a few flowers quivering vulnerably in the wind.

I turned on the radio.

All in some approximate place, where it happened, where life ended.

It was a familiar song.

I thought music would help, but like music, memories float upon the air, and when you least expect it, you're ten-years-old, Fall City.

Off the main road was where we lived, just between the railroad tracks and the old mill. Everyday, walking home from church and school, I passed by those boarded-up windows and that boarded-shut door that was made just a little scarier by the absence of one board. There are many reasons to run when you're ten: dogs, cops, nuns, the Mexican kids whose flesh had to take a little more of a beating than mine, and saw me as fair game; but then there was the old mill. I knew if I'd gotten a glimpse through that

space I might've seen something that would've taken a million beatings to get rid of. So I'd run like the hounds of Hell were at my heels, over the ditch, up the steps, through the house, and onto the salvation of my bed. There sounds of the day echoed throughout my body till my muscles relaxed; one thought remained—eternal damnation. I'd say a little prayer.

Jesus, please forgive me for that spider I stepped on. I had no right. And thank Heaven for Rose. Thank Heaven for Mommy. And thank Heaven for Grandma. And please, please, please don't let anything bad ever happen to any of them. And please, please, please don't send me to Hell.

Then I could sleep, and every sound and every fear dissolved into a single voice that uttered something low, almost hidden in my ear.

Fall City water tasted like dirt. It was well water, and in the summer when it didn't rain much, the well ran dry and was almost undrinkable. So we'd take our empty jugs to my grandparent's house in San Antonio and fill them up with "good San Antonio water."

My grandmother always looked so happy to see me, approaching me with her hand out ready to touch my cheek, saying, "Ay, mi'jo. Ay, mi'jo." We didn't know what she was saying, so we'd joke about it on the way home.

"Butt-hole," Rose would say to me. "She called you a butt-hole."

Once through the door I'd lose Rose, find her looking up at the large portrait in the living room, the man in dark-blue standing with a spear in his hand, staring down at a bleeding bull. Rose would always go to the bleeding bull and I'd go to the stone ram in the corner.

She said to me one time, staring up at the picture, “It’s ugly to kill something just because it’s weaker than you.”

“But bulls are strong,” I said, and then gave her a knuckle on the forehead. She became the bull and I the ram—the chase was on. I ran through the back door just fast enough to hold it shut behind me. There was a nudge on my shoulder. I turned around to see my mother holding a basket of clothes. The last time we came, my grandmother told us in broken English, “Yoos it,” nodding to the laundry room in the back yard. But now my mother was cursing under her breath, muttering to Rose about the lock on the laundry room door.

“It’s just a lock,” Rose told her. “Get her to unlock it.”

But it wasn’t that simple. It wasn’t just a lock. For whatever reason, it meant we were no longer welcome. Water was something we could get elsewhere. We could go to a Laundromat to clean our clothes, but this meant that something had ended. It could’ve been a simple misunderstanding, but mother wouldn’t bother to find out, and we were too young. That was the last time we visited my father’s parents.

We put our jugs of “good San Antonio water” in the back of the van, and said goodbye to the grandmother I’d never know. There wasn’t much to play with in the van, so we’d make use of what we had. There was a tire iron with three arms that Rose called the “three-way willie.”

“Three-way willie!” we yelled out the window as we drove off.

We knew she didn’t know what we were saying, and if she did, she’d be shocked.

Visiting my mother’s side of the family in Houston was a little different. My aunt said to my mother—talking about me, but not to me, “He has his father’s hair.” She

almost whispered, like it was a secret. Then she said, “Does he have it in his pants?” I could only guess what that meant.

Rose and I liked to shock people. We talked like the comedians we saw on cable TV, cursed like them when we were alone. At least twice Mother caught me. Rose locked me out of the house again, and I was cussing at her through the front door. I got the belt but Rose didn’t. I was the violent one of the two; that was the assumption. Once we had a cussing match with the Castro sisters down the street. We stood in our lawn throwing every four letter word we could think at them, even invented a few. For the Castro sisters it was different. We developed our skills from the TV, I don’t know where they got theirs from, but they didn’t simply cuss.

You motherfuckin’,

shaking their hips

titty-sucking

wagging their fingers

two-balled bitch.

They stomped their feet, shook their hips, turned as they stomped.

Stomp, *-fuckin’*

Stomp, *-suckin’*

Stomp, *bitch*

They serenaded us in the oppressive Texas sun. The Castro sisters were made for the heat. We were only half-made. The sun had modified us: lightened our hair; darkened our skin; but it was always just too hot to go outside. Sometimes if it rained enough, the ditches would overflow, and in a deep ditch where a dumpster was, all the

neighborhood kids swam amongst the trash. Once or twice I joined them. Otherwise, I stayed inside. You never knew what might happen outside. We could stay in our own lawn, play in the sprinkler to cool off, exchange insults and racial epithets with the neighbors, risk being attacked for it later, or we could stay inside and aggravate each other. It was always they and us, and they outnumbered us.

When I went out, I was a secret agent, ducking behind cars with my gun and briefcase. I had a special mission, and that was to elude the gang of boys that saw me as fair game.

We were only “white” to the Mexicans. To the Johnsons next door, it seemed, we weren’t quite white enough; we had no father; my mother had a big mouth and so did my sister; we had a weird last name; I was the only male, but a weak, fatherless nothing. I had to make up for what was just not right: a single mother and her bastard children. That’s what we were: the bastards in the middle.

Sometimes Rose would blow my cover, alert the boys throwing rocks at the old mill that I was hiding in the ditch. Then the chase was on, and I’d run behind the mill. I knew they wouldn’t follow me. Even for a group of boys, the mill was a threshold you didn’t pass; an unspoken agreement existed that said the mill was to remain hidden, was to remain in the dark. I’d only get close to it, for the dangers of the real world, the beating I’d get if I didn’t hide, outweighed the dangers of make-believe, of the demons that inhabited that old condemned corn mill across the street.

At home, I had my beanbag chair and the TV, and no matter what was on, Rose’s radio was a sure thing; music hung around us like a surrogate father. We were too poor

to know just how poor we were. And when you're small, you're too small to know just how small your home is.

"You're not staying inside all day," Rose would yell from the couch.

"You can't tell me what to do," I'd say.

"Yes I can. Mom said. And I'm not going to baby you."

"I'm not the one who needs to lose weight," I'd say.

After three glasses of milk, I'd have to go to the bathroom. But supremacy over the TV came first, so I'd take the remote with me. But first I'd have to pass by the scariest part of the house: Grandma's room. The smell of stale cigarette smoke and the sounds of life draining hacks crept out from her half-opened door. One time, the curiosity was too much. I sneaked in quietly to get a closer look. Even though I tried to be as quiet as a ninja, my first step was halted by, "Who's there?"

She was blind so I pretended to be a statue, thinking she wouldn't hear me. But it was no use. Somehow, she heard me.

"You better not think you're gonna steal nonna my cig'rettes," she said.

"Uh…"

"Lil' cow poker, what're you sneakin' 'round for?"

Then I slid out of the room and went back to my beanbag chair.

"Are you stealing Grandma's cigarettes?" I asked Rose.

I wasn't on alert. She sneaked up and grabbed the remote out of my hand. Then she changed the TV from my preferred *Transformers*, to her preferred, *Days of Our Lives*.

She was determined to get me out of the house.

"Go check the mail!" she said.

"I'll go check the mail," I said, "but only if you give me the remote when I get back."

"That's fair."

A trip to the mailbox and back was an easy thing to run for. So I jumped up from the beanbag and ran out as fast as I could. I could run as fast as light. Even the big mean dobby next door couldn't catch me. But when I got back, the door was locked shut. I banged as hard as I could on the flimsy hollow door. Then it came back to me. "Let me in! I have to pee!" Grandma wasn't going to get up to see what all the noise was about. There was no one to help me. All the reasons to run were creeping up from behind. I turned around to see if anyone saw me standing there on the steps in my underwear.

I yelled, "Let me in, you fat bitch!" and gave the door another blow. I threw the mail down and then punched the living room window as hard as I could. The glass shattered into a million pieces. I was amazed with myself. "I must be Superman," I thought. I looked at my hand. No blood. Then she opened the door. A beating was another good reason to run. The street was too hot for bare feet. You'd get blisters if you were on it too long. There were no sidewalks on the poor side of town, so there was nowhere to stand. All we had was a narrow gravel driveway, a lawn of dead yellow grass, and three cracked cement steps. We had a drainage ditch where a sidewalk would normally be, but it was always full of broken beer bottles. If I were coming home from school, I'd usually ignore the driveway and jump over the ditch, and if I happened to not jump high enough, I had my shoes to protect my feet, but not this time. I was

practically naked. There was no other place to run but to the mill across the street, where the trees had been allowed to grow, where I could find some shade.

I took off, and as I ran, I thought about those lizards on TV and how fast they ran, barely touching the ground. It was a place I'd visited in my worst nightmares. But there I was, at the very doorway of fear. I can't remember why exactly, but I think it was the Mustang. The Johnsons had a really nice Mustang. Well, I thought it was nice. They were real snobs, and if they saw me there, it would be the end of me. So without much thought, I eased my small body through the boards. I did it without touching any of the old rusty nails.

It wasn't like my nightmare, the one I had every night, that waited for me on the other side of consciousness, where everything was black and blue and the witch chased us, Rose and me, through hallways, by empty corpses that hung from doorways, flapping with a cold breeze that came from nowhere and yet came for *us*—with the witch—everywhere but nowhere; and the only place to hide was up high, where the witch couldn't reach, and Rose and me, safe at last, saw the sign on the lawn, our house.

What does it mean, Rose?

That's how it is in dreams. Words don't make sense.

What does it mean, Rose?

Death.

But it wasn't like that at all, and as I urinated on the ground, the mill came alive. The ground moved as all the smells came together—dirt, corn, pigeon shit and piss. It gave me something I needed. That dark crevice I looked into from afar; that empty

space that pulled me in, that made me look, that made me think nasty thoughts in church; that made me think evil thoughts at home; that made me run faster and faster, that made my heart jump; that made my nightmares unbearable; that made me into a insomniac at ten; that gave me an ulcer at ten; that gave me hemorrhoids at ten; that brought me closer to death; was nothing more than an old neglected mill.

Before the mill, riding my bike was the only thing to do. I'd ride up and down our street, from railroad tracks to Main Street, all summer long, back and forth and back and forth. But the mill was always there, in the corner of my eye, and the fear it fueled, pushed my pedals faster. But at the other end of the street, before I reached the railroad tracks, I had to pass by the Reyes brothers. There were four of them. The two older ones worked on this old beat up El Dorado on the front lawn. They were always there, one underneath it and the other up to his elbows in engine. I don't recall ever seeing it run, but I suppose the continuous presence of the Reyes brothers at that spot at the end of the street made them the patriarchs of the Projects. To me, they were the markers by which I turned around and went back to the other end of the street, to the mill and back again. To Rose and Mother, they were, "Those Mexicans at the end of the street."

Sometimes, while their older brothers were working on the car, the two younger brothers would throw the football around. I'd be sure not to get too close. I knew the youngest one from class, Salvador. He always sat at the back, and Sister Elizabeth never spoke to him because she thought he couldn't speak English. But he could speak English, I found out one day. I was too afraid to say anything to them. As soon as I got to the end of the street, I'd simply turn around and head back towards the other end. But

one time, I got too close. Salvador threw the ball down, and just when I was about to make my turn, "White fuck!" *Crack!* The blood poured and poured from my nose, and my hands were ripped open by the road when I fell off my bike. I went back to the house with tears, blood and dirt covering my face. Rose didn't know what to do.

"What the hell!" she said.

I didn't say anything. I didn't want her to know what happened, and she didn't know how to get hold of Mother.

"Stop crying!" she said.

I couldn't.

"You better stop your crying!"

But tears and blood flowed as one.

"You better stop your crying or I'll (it was the usual threat) rip off your arm and beat you with the bloody end of it!"

Mother used it on her and she in turn used it on me. We stood there for an hour, her terrified and me bleeding to death, until the blood and tears finally stopped. I never told her what happened and she never told Mother. We were both too terrified and would rather forget anything happened.

The day before school started, and a week after I ventured into the mill, I had my First Communion. When I sat in the confessional booth, I got scared. I was certain there was something I should be ashamed of, and that I should share it with the priest. But when it came to confess something, I had nothing to say. I was afraid I'd get in trouble if I said nothing, so I told him how much I hated my family. Of course he didn't say

anything useful to me, just to pray with my beads. I'd feel even worse after confession, like I was inadequate for not being evil enough to have something to confess, and that was my evil, my inability to acknowledge just how evil I am. Either way, I was evil.

When I got home, I was surprised to see Mother's car in the driveway. They must've called her at work to tell her just how evil I was. Rose was sitting at the kitchen table. She wouldn't look at me. Rose would often pretend not to notice me. Once she went a whole week not noticing me. The last thing she told me was, "You were never meant to be." But this was different. I wasn't the one who was meant to be ashamed.

"What happened?" I asked her.

"Shut up, Egghead," she replied. That was my other name. I don't remember exactly when it started. It must've been when I was born. I've seen the pictures and my head was pretty huge.

Mother walked through the door. She had that tightness around her mouth she only had when she was really angry.

"How many times," she said to Rose, "do I have to tell you to stay away from those girls?"

"What happened?" I asked.

Mother was staring intently at a piece of paper. "A hundred and seventy-five goddamn dollars to fix some little Mexican bitch's arm."

"What happened?" I asked.

She threw the paper on the table and stared down at Rose. "What happened?" she asked.

Rose looked out the kitchen window.

“What happened!” she asked.

Rose turned to her. Her face turned red, and all at once, tears and all, “Even though I asked her not to…the stupid teacher… called me by my real name…girl in class…little Mexican bitch…talked to me in Spanish. I’m no stupid Mexican and I don’t speak Spanish, I told her. And then her and all her cousins picked a fight with me after school.”

Mother sat down next to Rose, placed her hand on her shoulder. Rose pulled away from her and cried even louder.

“Stop crying!” Mother said.

She couldn’t stop. I thought she was going to cry herself to death.

Finally, Mother got up from the table and stood over her.

Rose jumped up from the table and ran to her room. She slammed the door. Mother stood at the door, trying to talk some sense into her.

“That’s why you should stay away from them,” she said. “You know they run in packs like wild animals.”

Rose had told me in the past that if anyone asks, “We’re Spanish, not Mexican.”

Mother finally went to her room. I stayed by Rose’s door.

“You shouldn’t be ashamed,” I said through the door.

“Shut up, Egghead!”

“It’s because I’m smart!”

“No, *Egghead!* A big head is a sign of deformity! The Neanderthals had big heads because they were primitive! And that’s why they died!”

“How do *you* know?”

“I learned it in school, stupid!”

“Don’t call me stupid, *bitch!*”

“Mom!”

Mother rushed out of her room with her big black leather belt in her hand. I ran out of house as fast as I could. It was ok. I was about to leave anyway.

*

Fall City 30 miles

Corpus Christi 120 miles

It seems like the radio always plays the same five songs. How many memories can a person accumulate around the same five songs? And which ones do we keep? Surely there must be as many happy ones as sad ones. But it’s the saddest memories that sink the deepest, and the happiest ones that fly away as soon as I roll down the window.

*

I was never a big fan of holidays. They just reminded me that we weren’t a real family and that we were poor. It was the day before Thanksgiving vacation when we went out west to a trail ride. All I can remember about trail rides is that it is a yearly event in which dozens of drunken people ride horseback from one ranch to another in the blistering cold. I remember Mike Hausman pretty well though. The ranch belonged to Mike. Mother was heavily into the whole country thing and would spend the weekdays at the ranch, and on the weekends, they’d go out ‘honky tonkin’.’ He was a real scumbag too. That’s what I remember most about Mike. Sometimes he’d be too drunk and Mother wouldn’t let him in the house. He climbed through my window one night, stumbled

around with his beer clutched in his hand. I held my pillow over my head hoping he'd disappear. He also brought us deer meat every Thanksgiving and Christmas. I remember those big slabs of meat wrapped up in that white butcher paper. Rose wouldn't eat any of it. She didn't think it was right to eat Bambi and all. I didn't care. I'd eat anything. The last I heard, he was doing time for writing hot checks.

It was the day before Thanksgiving. We woke up really early that day and drove - for I don't know how long. I slept most of the way. I don't remember leaving Grandma behind. It didn't concern me. Leaving Fall City and going to Karnes City was always agonizing. It just reminded me of how barren this part of Texas really was. But it was different for Mother. She'd look out at the broad pastures filled with giant bales of hay and see something I could never see. To me, it was a tremendous waste of space. When I was a kid I wanted to move somewhere like New York. That was all you saw on TV, the big city where all the sophisticated, intelligent people lived. Apparently, a lot of them were also Jewish. I'd never met a Jewish person before, but watching TV with all the -steins and -mans and -burgs, I grew up thinking the rest of the country was populated by Jewish people and we were the minority. Then I learned about the Holocaust, and I felt fortunate for what I had, but I also felt like I could relate. I'd had my family taken from me. Watching those images on the TV, the bodies piled up like so much dead meat, I felt the explosion of a million bombs go off in my head at once. Then I felt the fall. And it wasn't a fall that happened in some mythical place, in some paradise, it happened right here on earth. But wherever the Jews lived, it was far away from here. Here, there were nothing but krauts, polacks and Mexicans, as far as the eye could see.

I woke up and saw that we weren't in Fall City anymore. It was embarrassing. Everything was Polish, even more than Fall City, and that was why they spelt everything that should start with a 'C,' with a 'K'. It wasn't a Car Wash; it was a Kar Wash. It wasn't a Country Store; it was a Kountry Store. It just seemed ignorant to me.

"Is Mike a polack?" I asked her.

"Shush," she said. "That's not nice."

By now, Rose was driving so Mother could rest. Country music was blasting out of the dashboard, some twanging, irritating noise. Rose and I couldn't stand it, and when we had the chance, we put on some Pink Floyd.

"Why do you want to listen to that dark, dreary music?" Mother asked us.

" 'Cause it's good music," Rose replied.

"Yeah," I agreed.

"It's just so depressing," Mother said.

"But that's why we like it," Rose said. "Music is supposed to be sad."

"Why?" Mother asked. "When I was your age, I didn't complain all the time."

Rose turned up the radio and said, "Well, maybe you should've."

We didn't speak for the rest of the trip, just listened to that dark, dreary music.

I don't remember riding horseback, and I'm not sure who drove. All I remember is curling up in the back of Mike's pickup. It couldn't have been much different than being lost at sea, no distinguishable markers to tell you how far you've gone or where you were going.

We left early the following morning so Mother and Rose could get an early start on Thanksgiving dinner. Of course, I slept the whole way. All I remember is waking up in the back of the van. It was still dim outside. Our house looked dark except for the living room light we left on to ward off robbers. Rose was sitting on the steps with her shoes in the dirt. I opened the side door of the van and asked, “Where’s Mom?”

She didn’t respond. Then Mother called us into the house and told us to go to our rooms. We didn’t ask questions. It was so early, we just wanted more sleep. When I awoke, the house was quiet. I went into the hall. Mother’s door was closed. I put my ear to it. I could hear Mother and Rose crying. They’d often close themselves up in her room and talk for hours and hours, and whenever I’d try to come in, they’d tell me to go watch TV. I opened the door.

“What happened?”

Mother turned to me, stretched out her arms and said, “Baby, your grandmother has passed on.”

When she embraced me, the smell of beer and cigarettes was still on her breath. Till this day I associate death with that smell, mixed with the smell of cheap perfume.

“Passed on what?” I said as I pushed her away.

“No, baby, your grandmother has gone to a better place.”

“Really! Where?”

“To Heaven,” she said. “Your grandmother has gone to Heaven.”

“You mean, she is dead?”

“Yes, stupid,” Rose said, as she wiped the snot from her nose.

“Why?” I asked. “Why would she die?”

“Your grandmother had a hard life.”

“But we’ve had a hard life too,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “I know.”

I broke away from her embrace, and before I left the room, I turned around and said, “She’ll never forgive you for leaving her alone.”

Thanksgiving vacation was over and we went back to school. It was too cold to walk, so I took the bus. I didn’t like to take the bus because most of the kids were Mexican and they’d always pick fights with all the white kids. The bus driver was Mexican too, and she always had the radio turned up full blast on the Tejano station.

The first time I rode the bus, I sat with two Mexican boys. I was just a habit, for in San Antonio all my friends, including my cousins, were Mexicans. They looked at me, looked at each other, and one said to the other, “He’s white.”

The second time I rode the bus I sat with two white boys. They looked at me, looked at each other, and then one said to the other, “He’s Mexican.”

Eventually I sat alone in the back.

Christmas vacation followed quickly. It was safer to go outside during Christmas vacation because all the neighborhood kids stayed inside with their families. Mother was gone at her boyfriend’s and Rose was doing her own thing. I’d take my toys to the mill and play by myself all day.

All the tiny dirt roads spread out like dry streams. Sometimes I’d find little things buried away. Some of them were meant to be found. Some of them weren’t. It was Christmas Eve when I found a tiny jewel amongst some trash. I wasn’t sure what to think

of the old magazine pages it was buried in. But I knew that there was something very important about them. To think, human beings could do that to each other, and it made so much sense. But that was where it was, among these old pages. I picked it up and took it back home.

Just as I was hiding it in my drawer, Rose walked in.

"What are you doing, Egghead?" Sometimes Rose would come into my room and talk to me. I guess she was lonely too.

"Get out. Get out of my room."

"Why?" she said. "What are you hiding?" She tried to get a look over my shoulder.

"I said, get out!"

"What have you got in your drawer, you sick little boy?"

I closed the drawer and pushed her away.

"Don't push me," she said. "I'll tell Mom what you've been doing. I'll tell Mom that you've been up at that condemned mill doing God knows what."

"I don't care what you tell her," I said. I almost got her out of the room, but then she ran around me and opened the drawer. I grabbed it before she could see it.

"What is it?" she said as she pulled at my hand.

"Don't! You'll kill it!"

"What is it? Show it to me."

"No, you don't deserve it. You'll destroy it."

"Why do you say that, Josie?" She called me by my other name – Josie with a Joe. That's what Mom called me when she was around. For Dad and his side of the family, it was José with a Hoe. Rose only called me that when she wanted something.

“Because,” I said, “you’re a girl and girls are weak and only know how to destroy.”

“If you don’t, I’ll tell Mom.”

“You do that and I’ll tell her that you’ve been smoking, and not just cigarettes.”

“How do you know what I do?” she said.

“I know everything.”

“What could a stupid little boy like you possibly know?”

“Everything.”

Rose gave up and left the room. I was afraid it might suffocate, so I put it back in the drawer. It was so small and defenseless. Its mother must have left it buried among the old magazine pages. Its skin was as pink as a newborn babe’s. I’d try to keep it a secret. It was all mine. I could nurture it and give it life and no one could interfere.

I found a little old wicker basket and put some old towels in it to keep it warm. I’d try to feed it things – grass and bugs – but it was too small for that stuff. It needed milk, so I got some from the fridge. I heated it up in the microwave just long enough to make it warm, and then sucked it up into an old eyedropper. It seemed to work. The milk would go into its mouth and it would wiggle around and squint its tiny eyelids shut. I named it Jerry.

When Mother came home, I was lying on my bed with the basket beside me. When she came into my room, I hid it under my pillow.

“Why are you in here all by yourself?” she asked me.

“I don’t know,” I said. I usually wasn’t home when she came in, and she never seemed to notice. Rose must’ve told her something. She sat down on my bed and reached over to me. I turned away from her and faced the wall. She tried to talk to me.

Then she lay down beside me and began to pet my hair. I wanted to say something, but there was nothing to say.

I was born on Christmas day, so Jesus' birthday always sidetracked my own. And that's how it always was, every Christmas, Jesus or me, Jesus came first. Mother would keep us awake to go to midnight Mass. It was brutal. One probably wouldn't think it was possible to sleep standing up, but it is. Mother wanted us to be Catholic. I suppose she wanted to salvage something from my father's side of the family, and she thought Catholicism would give us that structure and tradition her Baptist side of the family could not.

Usually, after we got back from Mass, we'd wait till Mother went to bed and then open all the presents. The suspense was too much for us, and Rose was a genius when it came to deception. She must've seen it on TV or something, but she knew that if she took steam to the glue on the tape, she could remove it without damaging the wrapping paper. Even though most of our presents were cheap little things, we were always sure to get at least one good present. And after we knew what our special present was, we'd wrap them back up again. And then, on Christmas morning, we'd be sure to look real surprised. But this Christmas was different. It was my eleventh birthday and I was the sickest I've ever been in my entire life. I couldn't go to mass because I couldn't stand up. So Mother and Rose went without me. They must've thought it would be better to pray for me at church than to be with me at home.

The whole event seemed like a dream. I was in a canoe out in the middle of the ocean, the sun blazed down on me, the waves were rough, the canoe spun around and

around until I puked in the waste basket beside the bed. Jerry was in the top drawer, and I hadn't had a chance to feed him. I built up some strength and scooped him up out of the drawer, and then crawled into the kitchen with him in my tightly shut hand. I felt him squirm the whole way. When I made it to the kitchen, I opened my hand, and he was dead. The poor little thing must've just died in my hand. The next thing I knew, I was lying on the kitchen floor, clutching a dead mouse, staring up at Rose and Mother.

"I'm dead," I told them.

Mother left the room. Rose just stood there with her usual distrustful stare. She didn't believe I was really sick.

"No you're not, stupid."

Mom walked back into the room with a thermometer in her hand. After she saw that I had a hundred and four temperature, she picked me up and took me to the hospital.

When we arrived at the hospital in Karnes City, they wheeled me into the emergency ward. I still had that tiny, sweaty corpse in my hand. The nurse laid me down on the examining table. I can still remember how cold the white paper felt, how it smelt. It reminded me of that white butcher paper Mike brought us deer meat in. The bile rose up in my throat. I clutched Jerry tight and ran out of the room.

It was sleeting outside. There was a rusty old playground behind the hospital. I played there once when I came up here with Mother. That was where I ripped into the cold wet mud, placed the tiny corpse in the hole and sealed it shut, and then passed out.

I woke up in ICU with a tube sticking out of my arm. Rose and Mother sat by the bed.

"What were you thinking?" Mother said. "You could've died!

"Yeah," Rose said, "What are you crazy *and* stupid? Going to play when it's twenty degrees outside?"

"Everyone dies," I said.

Mother buried her face into the bed to muffle the cry. Rose just sat there and looked at me. I couldn't tell if she was angry with me or not. Rose never looked at me with approval. Finally, she leaned back in her chair, turned her head to the side, and looked out the window. It was actually snowing. I remember that well. All the tiny flakes glided carelessly upon the air, only to dissolve, mercilessly, as soon as they reached the ground. Then out of nowhere, Rose said, "I'm going to live to be hundred."

Then a single tear…around the slope of her cheekbone…down her face…onto her sweater…absorbed into nothing.

*

CORPUS CHRISTI NEXT 5 EXITS

It was my yearly trip to Corpus. I left Fall City, along with the nightmares of my youth, behind. I pulled over to the side of the freeway. It was all in some approximate place, where a life ended, the last place she touched, and the flowers I sat beside the cross were nothing but a small sign amongst the weeds, telling whoever passed by at 65 miles an hour that someone loved died here.

It doesn't take much thought really; it's not brain surgery: you slide the tray onto the belt and the machine does the rest. Even a moron could do it. Actually, I like the sound of it. She's a big steel mother I impregnate with life, and she milks her children—saucers, knives, spoons, cups, pans, big giant mixing bowls used to mix God knows what—with hot soapy love. Yeah, it sanitizes my mind to know that at this moment in my life the only thing that makes it meaningful is that I'm a motherfucking dishwasher. Not only that, I'm the only American here.

Since the new university opened up, and sense corporate was bought out by Chamberlain Food Company, all of these students from out of state, and from all over Asia, came and took all the jobs. The labor force that primarily consisted of Mexican-Americans is now run by white people and by foreigners. All the white people, all the Americans, work on the floor. All the foreigners, all the brown people, work in the kitchen. But all the Mexican-Americans that worked here when I started, natural born Americans whose families have lived in this country for generations, who spoke nothing but English, were gradually fired-off when the new university made a deal with the hotel to use the kitchen for their classes during the off season when beach attendance was low. I'm the only one left, but only because I'm the newest and therefore paid the least. Maybe if I stay quiet, maybe if I do what I did when I was a kid—pretend to be invisible—they won't fire me. Besides, this is the best job I've had in years. I'd just have problems at other jobs. I'd have to talk to people. Here, I don't have to say a word.

When I applied, I wanted to wait tables. During the summer the tips alone would be enough to pay bills. Naively I thought I might reap some of the benefits of my

Mexican heritage. This *is* a Spanish speaking community after all. So on the application, under special skills, I put: speaks Spanish fluently (which is a lie). But I thought if the boss saw that, and then saw my last name, he'd think: "This man would be a great asset to me." But little did I know, "speaks Spanish" equaled "works well in the kitchen," equaled, "excellent dishwasher," equaled, "excellent busboy."

The first time I applied, I was faced with the option: "Hispanic Non-White," or simply, "White." And then I got that headache, that pain in my head when I'm faced with two contradictory, yet correct answers; that yes, I'm white, but I'm also Hispanic; that the term Hispanic, has nothing to do with skin color. So the first time I applied, I put "white," for in all honesty, I'm quite white. Roger, the sous-chef at the time, a Hispanic man that had worked for the hotel for more than twelve years, before being "let go," asked me, sitting across from his desk, "What sort of name is that?" referring to my last name. I said, "Hispanic." I'd stumbled upon something by accident. To Roger, I was attempting to elevate myself above him; my Spanish, Latino, Chicano, Mexican, whatever you want to call it, name was being undermined, was being discarded by this white boy because he thinks he's above such classifications, that he can somehow be, indivisibly, white and American. So the second time I applied, the time that I got hired, I put, "Hispanic."

Andrew, the chef, looked at my name and asked, "What does it mean?"

It was a different reaction. He knew the name was Hispanic, but there was something else there. The man's hand trembled as he held the application.

"Your name has meaning," he said. "Mine doesn't."

I had affronted the man with my name. I told him what it meant. "Son of Esteban," I said. "The -ez at the end is genitive." I wanted to tell him that the -er at the end of his

last name was also genitive, but the man was some other place. He was confused. I was a white boy, like him, but I had an origin, and he trembled at the weight of my origin.

I said I was the only American here. That's not entirely true. Andrew's the whitest man I've ever met. Whether or not that makes him more American, I won't say. But why else would his picture be pasted-up all over town? Why else would his face be the face of gourmet excellence this sweatshop pretends to be?

This is the longest I've had a job in five years, which is probably why I can't find a better one. I've spent my time working on myself. I don't care about money. I want something that will stand the test of time. Knowledge is something constant. I can take it in, and it becomes a part of me. It's something I control. No one can take it from me. And from the outside, to everyone else, to the other kitchen workers, Andrew, the snotty little girls waiting tables, I must look like another fucking moron washing dishes, but on the inside, I'm goddamn Siddhartha under the tree, contemplating, deep in thought, full, enlarged, pregnant with Now. This doesn't mean I don't do my job. I just move with such grace and intent that it appears that I'm lazy. And if any of these motherfuckers get in my face and tell me I'm not working hard enough, I'll unleash the wrath of the Cosmos on them.

Shit! The goddamn glove tore.

"Hey, Walton?"

"What?"

It's Amar. The first time I saw Amar I thought for sure he was Mexican, but he's actually Pakistani. It's funny how that works. If you're white you're white and if you're black you're black, but if you're brown, you can be anything.

“After you’re done there, Chef wants to talk to you.”

Amar has a meek disposition that at first could be mistaken as Zen, but then he speaks and I know he’s just stupid.

“Yeah?”

Andrew wants to tell me I’m not working hard enough. But it’s not all his fault. Chamberlain Food Company sent one of their henchmen to govern over us. Kurt Conrad. I’ve heard the rumors, Andrew and Jason saying that he’s an ex-con who did time for child rape, but because his brother owns part of the company, he’s here to make sure we’re not wasting money. And now there will be no breaks without clocking out; and now all meals will come out of our paychecks; and now there will be absolutely no praying, which means that Andrew can’t run to his little pillow in his office and meditate whenever something goes wrong. The problem is that in this business you’ve got to have a vice. Some do drugs but most are alcoholics. It’s an adaptive behavior, really, a way to deal with the everyday humiliation of having someone over you, telling you you’re not working fast enough, and sometimes when you’re lost in thought the voice inside your head screams, and next time you’ll bring a gun, maybe put a bomb under Conrad’s car. But then you realize that all you’re doing is seeing from the bottom up, and like all slaves, your main purpose in life is to hate your master. So hatred becomes a friend, and like all friends, you have to give it something or it’ll betray you, reveal to the world that you, yes you, are a thinking, feeling, hating human being. You say nothing, and hatred washes over you like early summer tide, filling your vision with brown algae and your nose with the ocean’s stench; and it’s a good bargain, a good exchange, for it’s silent at the bottom of the sea. Some are ascetics. They don’t have the

privilege of silence, so instead of going under, they pretend they're on a crest held aloft and separate from the rest of us who hide under trough; but sand gets everywhere, no one's immune to it. Yes, some, like Andrew, find religion, and when it all gets to be too much, he falls apart, the world falls apart. He runs to his little pillow in his office and meditates for an hour, sometimes two. But not anymore.

"Walton?"

"What?"

"Andrew wants to talk to you."

"Sure."

If he wants to talk to me he can come find me. Punch the big black button and voila—I'm on the beach. A new stack of glasses brought down by a young girl. Cold blue eyes hidden behind a loose rubbery smile. Pull the tray off the top, slide it onto the belt, hot spray and a short glimpse at a nice young ass—a wild mind let loose on the open sea, the endless waves, a constant rhythm…

"Walton?"

"What?"

"Can I see you in my office?"

"Sure, Andrew."

We walk through the kitchen and all eyes dart up from their chopping and rolling and mixing. Rolando the Guatemalan baker has got the radio turned up way too loud and the endless rattling on of Spanish talk radio really pisses off Chong the Korean sandwich/salad maker. Rolando's going to be president someday and Chong a saint. She pins her little prayers up all over the place. They mean nothing to me. It's just too

easy. Life's hard. Why trivialize it with such easy logic? She's the oldest and has worked here the longest, so everyone calls her Mamma. I don't. She's not my mother. I'm just a dishwasher.

Andrew sits slouched, looking indefinitely at the desk. He gives me a brief moment of eye contact, a tilt to the side really, a little acknowledgment for a little person. The desk is covered with gourmet food magazines and other busy work Kurt has thrown on Andrew, for secretly, they both know he has no idea on earth what he's doing. Andrew starts digging through a stack of papers tilting towards the edge of the desk.

"Have a seat, Walton."

"Thanks, I'll stand."

He looks down at the table, then straight ahead, but not at me. "I don't think you're really part of the team, Walton."

"Team?" This is the bullshit Conrad brought with him. We're a team now.

"Walton?"

"What team? Who the fuck do you think cleans this place?"

"Walton—"

"I work forty hours a week, cleaning this place."

"It's the reading too, Walton. We can't have you reading on the clock."

It's true. I do read. How could I not? I'd go crazy cooped-up in this goddamn kitchen all day. Everyday, when I take the trash out, my paperback stuffed in my back pocket, I hide behind the dumpster where it stinks of every kind of shit known to man. Sometimes the betties are out, the surfer girls. I watch them ride the waves, smoke a joint, go back to work stoned, think about what I've read.

“Walton?”

“That’s nuts! What am I supposed to do? Just stand there and do nothing.”

I point indignantly through the office window at Amar. He’s leaning against the water cooler with his arms crossed. Like always, it’s that blank, dead stare. He’ll stay where he’s at and never wonder why. He’s worked here five years and Jason, Conrad’s yes man, has been here two weeks.

“You can tell me to go fuck myself—”

“No, Andrew—”

“But I’m afraid,” here it comes, “I’m going to let you go.”

“If you think that’s best, that’s fine with me.”

It’s a beautiful day. Exceedingly hot! What a gift! I’m free! It’s too hot for clothes. There should be a law on Padre Island: No Clothes Allowed. And it’s Friday. Take this damn shirt off. Take these damn pants off. Well, maybe not the pants. Just the shirt. There’s always the beach, and on the beach we’re all children: the ocean’s our mother and the sun’s our father. Further down the island we can test the boundaries of skin, but only old married couples and gay men go there.

It’s on the main beach, that’s where the betties go. That’s where I met Diana. It was the last time I got fired.

***

I was digging ditches and the foreman didn’t think I was working hard enough, told me to go home when he caught me staring out at the waves too long. I was sitting on the beach and out she came on her half shell, producing some friction upon the

waves, white foam all around, palms dug deep in the wet sand, born, intimate. She pushed her body up, bathing suit top stretched around her large breasts, sand clumped between them. She walked towards me with her board at her side and her eyes squinting from the mixture of sand and sun.

"I'm Diana," she said.

She put out her tiny dark hand. I took it. She was much darker than me. She looked Mexican, but maybe not, maybe Asian. Her hand was so small. I felt the grains of sand rolling and colliding with each other, and I imagined us as two grains of sand colliding within our own fleshy embrace.

"Can I get a hit off that?" she said.

"Sure," I said. She sat down beside me. I passed it to her. She took a hit. Her small purple lips constricted, her head of wet and sandy hair tilted back, diaphragm enlarged, back arched, swim suit top stretched at the bottom where gland meets arm pit…holding it…holding it…and then a long exhale run through with a harsh cough.

"Thanks," she said, then jumped up and ran back to the ocean. Before she jumped on her board, she turned around and gave me a big smile. I wanted to run into the sea after her, but I still had my jeans on from work, and my dick was too hard anyway.

***

It's just before school starts and everyone's getting what they can of sun and tide. It's like the circus has come to town and the ocean is the main attraction. The jocks have their daddies' trucks and their cheerleader girlfriends. They're innocent most of the time,

but at the beach, they down too many beers, puke in the dunes, pass out in their truck beds, sometimes, face first in the sand.

I sit far enough away from the hotels and restaurants so I can look around and pretend it's nothing but beach around me. But as I look to the south, I still see it: the hotel where I no longer work. It's around where I met her. Maybe she's out there somewhere. Maybe I can see her if I look far enough.

***

"How far out do you go?" I asked her, later that day when the sun was melting into the dunes. She looked at me strangely. It was getting late. The warm breeze turned cool. She was suspicious of me. She looked out at the horizon, deep into the waves, like maybe she could find the answer out there. She turned around and ran out into the waves.

"Come on!" she said. "I'll show you!"

"Not now!" I said. Maybe when I was a child and death was a game. You never imagine yourself old, and if you were going to die young, so be it.

***

I hate going to the restrooms at the beach. I guess it's because I can never tell if the floor is covered with seawater or piss. Luckily I don't have to shit, and I'd just as well piss in the dunes.

The heat is overbearing. I wet my shirt in the water fountain and wrap it around my neck. Two girls walk past me. I can tell by their fresh white skin that they just got here. In a week they'll be red. They say something derogatory about the seawater, about it being dirty or something. I want to explain that it's the type of algae that makes it

brown. It's not dirty; actually, nothing brown is dirty, for nothing natural is dirty. It's simply because the ocean floor is much shallower in the Gulf than say on the East Coast, where the ocean is deep and only the strong blue spectrum of the light wave can reach through to the bottom. The algae there developed a nice blue tint from soaking up all that ultra-violet light. It's the same reason some people have blue eyes, since only blue light waves are strong enough to break through the heavy overcast that looms over Northern Europe, and conversely, why some people have brown eyes, because the sky is always clear and full of sun in the southern hemisphere.

But I say nothing. Blue eyes would run right through me and I'd crumble into sand.

"Excuse me," I say. It looks like Diana loading up her car. I ask for a ride. "Just up island," I say.

She tilts her sunglasses down at me, looks me over head-to-toe. I think she's going to say no, but she doesn't. I don't want to say anything because I doubt she'll remember me.

We're rolling off the beach and she turns to me, "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

I say yes and remind her about that day almost a year ago.

Then she says, "Got any weed?"

I pull out a roach and light it. She rolls up the windows, asks me if I can get anymore. I say, "Yeah, but we'd have to go inland."

We turn on Ocean Drive. She seems nervous, lights a cigarette and begins to flick anxiously out the window. I can tell she never smokes in the car because it smells too clean. Maybe it's the silence. She puts on some music.

"Do you know where to get any cocaine?" she asks.

"No," I say, which is a lie. "I only go down," I say. "I know where to get heroin." Which is true. Not that I do it all the time. Cocaine's for people who want to be awake. I don't want to be awake. I'd rather spend the days barely awake, nearly at the point of sleep. "I only wish to sleep," I tell her, which is an odd thing to say aloud. And the evil thing occurs to me, getting her all fucked on smack and taking advantage of her.

"You can!" she says, like it's the best news she's heard all day.

And I can't resist the attention, so I take her to my old neighborhood. I don't like going inland because it makes me feel trapped. So I never go, not even to visit my parents. But I know an old lady who sells morning, noon and night, anything you want: pot, coke, heroin, acid (on a good day), and meth. But I'd never get her any of that other stuff. It's not right to be that alert, when sleep is nothing but a blink between blinding white light.

We pull up to the house behind an old condemned Catholic church. Neighbors are bewildered by Nora. They can't explain it: how does Nora go so long without getting busted? Rumor has it she sold her soul to the devil. I think it's just because nobody gives a shit if you sell drugs to Mexicans. But a white girl disappeared out here one day and Nora had to close shop for a month till they found her, all smacked out in a house with a bunch of doped-up vatos. She claimed she'd been raped and held prisoner. But I know it was the drug that kept her from leaving. Once you feel that blanket wrap around

you, that warmth of eternal sunset upon your face, there is no greater bliss, you'll do anything to feel it again. But that's the lie. You never will. Those were virgin cells—cells that had never felt the raw light of open blue sky—that now know the comfort of infinite dusk, and only the faintest light seeps through. But now she's safe and it's business as usual.

A man in a suit carrying a briefcase walks out her back door. I wait till he leaves. It never occurs to me that I might get busted or something. It's like death, if it happens it happens. I knock on the door.

"Bueno," she says, holding her grandchild. The curlers in her hair are wrapped in foil and pick up the late afternoon sun creeping through the trees behind me. She looks like some kind of b-movie alien. I've known this person my entire life, I went to school with her daughter, but every time I come to her door, she looks at me like I'm a cop.

"Com'estas?" I say.

"Bueno," she says again.

"Tres por cinco," I say. That's three joints for five dollars. It's a bargain. "Y…" I want to chat with her in Spanish to impress her, but I don't speak that well. "Chiva," I say. "A twenty."

"Bueno," she says, otra vez.

She hands me the substance in a tiny plastic bag. Chiva is heroin, but in comes in a fine brown powder. So you don't have to shoot it, you can snort it.

We leave Clarkwood and go back to Padre. There's a nice warm feeling I get when I leave Corpus and go back to the island. The way I see it, human beings were never meant to live away from the ocean. The sea flows through our veins. The sun is in

our skin. All civilizations began there. It's only as a result of overpopulation that people moved inland. Everything from the beach out might as well be desert or dune. People were never meant to live there.

She says, "I've never tried it before."

We go to her house. It's the biggest house I've ever seen. What would a girl like this, someone who has everything, need with drugs? I don't want to be her father, so I say nothing.

"I'm a little scared," she says.

I'm not sure if she means me or the drug.

We're both feeling really good and she's curled up beside me. I hardly know this person, but here we are. If only she were transparent, I could see through her and know what she's thinking. I could try to talk to her, but there's nothing to say. We've exhausted our common interest, drugs. The only thing left is sex.

"Do you have a guitar?" I ask her.

She says, "Uh huh."

"Well, where is it?"

"In my brother's room."

Like knowledge, music is something I control. But not now, for as I get up, I feel the full weight of the drug. I can't play, for I can't even hold myself up. As with everything today, I'm powerless.

***

That time we met a year ago she simply ran out to sea. I stayed behind, waited till she came out and asked her for a ride home. She dropped me off down the street from my house. The sun was setting and palm trees were swaying with the breeze, their thick trunks bending and creaking over the streets. The ditches overflowed with rain the night before pushing frogs and tarantulas and cockroaches out into the street. Cars and trucks and diesels smashed them into ground creating a collage of various shades of browns, reds, greens and oranges.

We lived in a little room behind an old white house. An old lady owned the old house and rented the room out to us. It was pathetically small, with no central air or heat, but the rent was cheap. The old woman was senile, but the room was away under some trees, so it was easy to avoid her. The trees kept the house cool, but it was bad for bugs. We lived upstairs, and the bugs that couldn't reach us from the ground, fell from the trees. I opened the door to a gush of ac. The unit in the window only had two levels: freezing cold and off. She cleared her throat with her lovely little grunt. There was no other sound like it. I could be alone in a crowd of strangers, hear her clear her throat, and know it was her. I walked in the bedroom. She lay on her back looking up at a book. The blinds were open and fleeting sunlight collected around her thick red hair. She wore the skirt I bought her last summer. She didn't hear me come in over the ac unit.

"How's my beautiful pregnant wife?"

She put the book down as I eased up beside her, put my hand on her stomach. I never know how dark I am till I see my hand against her paper white skin.

"What's this?" I asked.

“A baby book. A friend from work gave it to me.” She opened the book, picked up the pen she used to keep her place and then wrote something. “See. It has a day-to-day journal that I can start when he or she is born.” She spread the pages open to show me. “It even has a place to record Mommy and Daddy’s family history. This way, baby can look at this when he or she is all grown up and know where Mommy and Daddy came from.” She wrote *Arnold Moffat* under **Mommy’s Grandfather**. “And who was Daddy’s grandfather?” she asked me, pen ready to write.

According to myth, my grandfather was a German man named Karl. My grandmother was a prostitute, and this German guy used to visit her on a regular basis.

“I don’t know who my grandfather was, remember?”

“Oh, right. How about grandmother?”

“Do you really want her in the book?”

She skipped the space and wrote *Daniel Moffat* under **Mommy’s Father**.

“Well, what about Daddy’s other grandparents?”

I’ve never spoken to my other grandparents. They live in Robstown and don’t speak English.

“I can’t remember their names,” I tell her. “And they don’t speak English anyhow. Why should we do this?”

She closed the book.

“Our child might want to know who his father was.”

She said “was” and I wanted to change the subject.

“Was?” I said. “What about now? I am. We are. That’s what matters. Besides, if it knew where it came from, it wouldn’t want to be my child. It’s not fair. Why punish ourselves like this?”

“I’m always below looking up,” I thought. If I said it, she would say, “Below? Like the devil?” Like a snake I slithered up inside her, impregnated her with my demon seed. I should populate the island with more demons. I said nothing.

***

She lets me feel her breasts.

“They’re beautiful,” I tell her. There’s a big blue gothic cross on the right one.

She tells me it’s “gang stuff.”

I think about all the guys she’s been with, knowing it comes with the territory. None of it adds up. Why would someone who has everything be a druggy gang-banger?

I tell her I moved away from the old neighborhood because the gang violence had gotten too bad. I’d made a few enemies, not because I was a gang-banger, but because my best friends since childhood, Alonso and his brother Sebastian, were the leaders of the Tormentas. They had control over the Eastside of the barrio. They defended me when we moved in, when everyone in the neighborhood wanted me dead.

We never knew when the next car coming down the street would be the one. One day a rival gang would come and the brothers would have to defend their territory. Fucking machismo bullshit.

One night someone screamed, “Everybody down!” and we took cover. Then I got frantic and the brothers gave me hell for it.

“What the fuck was that?” I asked Alonso. He didn’t respond, maintained his soldier in the trench act, casting a thousand-yard stare down the dimly lit road. I slithered up beside him on the grass to get a better look. I saw the old Plymouth tilting forward on its weight at the stop sign.

After the car turned out of sight, Sebastian walked out of the ditch. My heart and head throbbed as one. It must’ve been from the mixture of heat, fear, pot and alcohol. When Alonso came out from behind the shed, I asked, “What the fuck just happened?”

He ignored my question, looked at me like I was in the wrong place. Instead of answering me, they’d make fun of me. It was nothing personal. It was just their way of letting me in, showing me that they respected me enough to fuck with me. It was game for them, like basketball or soccer. They had a way of making the littlest thing you did into a joke. They moved around you in an almost mystical synchronicity, picking you apart, joking about everything from the girls you fucked to the Spanish you spoke, at your white face and your Mexican last name. Under the streetlights they were like two dark spirits dancing on the wind.

“Oh, man,” Sebastian told me in private. “Did you shit your pants?”

“Why?” I asked.

“ ’Cause when you ran into that ditch, you yelled, ‘Holy shit pants!’ ”

He’d always tell it to you in private. The point was to gain your confidence and make you think it actually happened, that you actually did that weird thing that didn’t make sense.

“Holy shit pants?” I said. “I didn’t yell holy shit pants. Did I? I don’t think I yelled holy shit pants.” I’d question his honesty, and then my memory, and then think, maybe I did say it.

“Did they stop?” Alonso asked his little brother.

“I think they stopped at the end of the street. They’re gone now.”

“I mean, why would I say holy shit pants?” I insisted.

“We’ll wait to see if they come back,” Alonso said.

The two went into the shed, apparently to look for something. Alonso came out with something in his hand. I couldn’t see it clearly, for the light from the street didn’t reach that far. He pointed it up to the light, and I could see it clearly. He was staring through the chambers of a pistol. I walked to the porch and put down the beer I’d nearly lost. My head was still pounding from the scare.

Like the geek I was, I said, “You know, guys, you only fight what you bring with you.” I’m not sure why I said it, but the situation seemed to demand a voice of reason, or something similar to one.

“What did you mean by that?” Alonso asked me.

“Well, what do you think I meant?” I replied.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I’m not sure what I meant. I opened my mouth and out it came out.”

And then, “Holy shit pants!” Sebastian yelled. “It came out of his mouth!”

After a minute or so of pointing at me and yelling, “Holy shit pants, it came out of his mouth,” we decided to go back into the house, for we had sobered up a little and there was pizza in the fridge. After we appeased our drug-induced munchies, we

smoked some more pot and turned on some music, real loud. We could always feel the music in us, and everything in the world just faded into the background. Then I heard the shots against the wall. I tried to tell them, but they didn't hear me. Then the window shattered and I was shot in the arm.

***

"It was a big deal in the neighborhood," I tell Diana. "All of a sudden, I was getting all this respect, and only because I almost got killed."

She gives me a hard core, "no shit" look, and I realize she's one of them.

"But with the respect came a price," I tell her. "Now I was a gang-banger too. I didn't want to be a gang-banger."

She closes her eyes and turns away from me.

"What are you?" I ask her

She turns to me, opens her eyes and says, "German-Jew, Korean, and Spanish."

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

She says nothing, just smiles with sleepy eyes. I have to know it: why is she so fucked up? I don't want to be her father, but I think preaching to her is more important than fucking her; a conclusion, no doubt, a number of preachers have failed to come to.

"You are a very special person," I tell her. She smiles at me like it was the worst come-on in history. "Being mixed," I tell her, "means you see the world from a special position, from a position no one else sees from." I tell her, now, I know, I'm walking on thin ice, "You are situated at the intersection of multiple layers of conflict."

"What?" she says.

"You are capable of an infinite amount of possibilities."

“Well,” she says, wiping the crust from her eyes, “That’s kind of scary.”

“No, Diana, it means you have more freedom than most people, simply because you have more obstacles than most, more people to overcome.”

“But that means I can’t be trusted. That I’m…well…dangerous.”

“Right,” I agree. “But in a good way.”

“How can being dangerous be good?” she says.

“You see from multiple perspectives. You can leave this place. You don’t have to be stuck like Sebastian and Alonso. You can get away, because…because,” I want to say, “Because you’re new”; “because you’re as fresh as the morning sun,” but instead, I say, “Because you’re brown.”

“But those guys, those fucking cholos, they were brown, weren’t they?”

“Well…someday…we’ll all be brown.”

“A lot good that does me now,” she says.

“Till then, you’ve gotta learn to be,” I tell her, quite casually, taking one of her cigarettes.

“Be what?” she asks.

“Be, but not be.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means, knowing who you are, where you belong, and where you come from.”

“I know where I belong,” she says, cupping her right breast, lifting that big blue gothic cross to my face. Then she cups them both and says, “Where’s my bra?” rolls off the couch and digs through the cushions. “What about you,” she says, holding the sloppy white thing to her face, “Where do you belong?”

“Under the sea,” I want to say. But instead, “Nowhere but here, right now, with you.”

I don’t want to go home. I don’t want to tell Sarah I lost another one. I don’t want to tell her that everything’s falling apart again. So I tell Diana, “I’ll get you more, but we’ve got to hang out.”

We drive a couple of hours till we get to the Clothing Optional part of the beach, take our clothes off, and then lay down in the sand. Tide rushes up around us. I sit up, look out to sea. This is it, the endless sea, right here, right now. We’re not going anywhere, we’re turning into sand. The water gets too high and eats away the sand, eats away at us. I scoot back, but we’re over-taking anyway. I dig my palms deep, as if I can grab onto the earth and keep it from falling apart beneath us. I’m swallowed by the shore, deeper and deeper, till I come upon something hard. It’s a root of some sort. I pull on it to see if it’ll move. I look around. It’s up in the dunes: a little tree. That little tree dug its roots all the way out to the ocean. The ocean changes and moves, but that little tree, penetrates deeper and deeper. I look to Diana to see if she’s ok. She’s in a daze, but not like before. She’ll never be that high again.

Fireflies

Chris had never seen a cactus before that wasn't in a pot or a picture, so to be surrounded by them was a bit unsettling, and coming from the isolation of a juvenile detention center, and prior to that, from the concrete jungle of Brooklyn, any place that didn't have an underground system and a piece of cement to walk on could only seem surreal,—yet there was no word, nothing symbolic to describe the landscape before him, other than the word, "isolation." This place was itself a sort of solitary confinement, and only someone seeking punishment would live here. "Why would anyone want to live here?" he wanted to ask the woman walking before him, Brenda, who was telling him little facts about the house as they wavered around cacti.

"All our water comes from the sky," she said, pointing to the three, giant green reservoirs beside the house.

All he wanted to know was why? Why would anyone want to live here? That, more than anything, more than his belief in God, was unclear, but what was clear, even clearer than Chris's faith, was that Texas was flat. Someone once told him that Eden was flat, and that because it was covered with lush vegetation you couldn't see where it ended, and at the very end, where Eden stopped, God hid behind the vegetation, watching his creations like some sort of science experiment. Eden died when they turned away from Him, and this flatland could only be that—a fallen world—for the sky was too high, and the earth was too low. No God could be watching for there was simply no place for a God to hide. Nonetheless, upon considering this, Chris, after crooking a suspicious gaze to the empty sky above, lowered the rim of his baseball cap.

“The walls are 18 inches thick,” Brenda said, waving to the edifice like a tour guide.

There was a gun blast in the near distance.

“They can withstand a slug from a .44 caliber pistol,” she added. They walked around the house when she said, “Behold my vegetable garden,” and then proceeded to itemize, one by one: her tomato patch; her parsley patch; her jalapeno patch; the homemade fertilizer pellets that looked like giant wads of used-up chewing tobacco. She showed him the cactus shaped like the head of Lincoln (with a piece missing from his forehead). She showed him the No Trespassing sign slowly being swallowed by an old oak tree. Chris looked with wonder at the metal sign slightly folded forward like a displayed Christmas card. Brenda suddenly stopped the tour when Chris leapt back five feet. She looked down to see the scorpion that was crawling near his foot. He kept a safe distance till it disappeared in the brush, now looking down as he walked.

The man standing in the shade was either wearing a pink suit or nothing at all. He stood with his back to them, aiming a pistol at beer cans on the fence post in the distance, and as they approached it was clear, that yes, the man was completely naked.

“John, Chris is here.”

She told Chris over the phone, “John hasn’t been himself lately.” She wouldn’t go into details, simply saying it was “Some kind of phase.” The tall naked man with a large gun in his hand approached. Brenda looked to Chris with a bothered smile on her face, let out a tired sigh and went back to the house. He placed the gun on the table, and now, Chris made sure to look up. The man embraced him, and as he had done a

moment before fleeing a dangerous insect, held his body a safe distance from the naked man. The hug lasted an eternity.

"Sit," John said.

They sat on dirty lawn furniture covered with old beach towels.

"The wife thinks I'm losin' it," John said. "She's very religious, won't join me. Maybe if you were, well, you know, to join me, she wouldn't think I'm—"

He stopped in mid-sentence; the word, whatever it was—"crazy" perhaps,—wouldn't come; he simply had the look of someone about to speak and reveal something embarrassing. This man, the biological father he had never spoken to, but had exchanged a few letters with throughout his stay at the detention center, was drunk, naked and armed, asking him to take his clothes off. He wasn't what Chris imagined he would be, not the Marine his half-sister Lucy described. This man was an aging hippie. This man had hair down to his ass. He looked around at the empty beer cans littering the ground, to the fence that was covered from one end to the other with them, and then to his naked father that was drinking one. Chris fell forward and began to heave.

He felt John grip him under the arms, and without much effort, the man had him sitting in his chair again.

"My wife," he said. "She's very conservative. It no good," he said, waving his hand in the air, "to be that guilty."

"But shame's good," Chris said, clearing the cold sweat from his brow and wiping it on his shirt, "Keeps us from doing ugly things."

"We do what we have to, though, don't we?" The old man winked at him.

John rubbed his neck where sweat mixed with dirt. Chris noticed how red his father was and thought of the word, “redneck.” Dirt accumulated in the scar just above his collar bone, where the bullet had entered. It was more than a scar, it was a crater; moreover, it was a symbol that John Warren, the Marine, the decorated war hero, was vulnerable.

“Chris,” he said. “Son,” he added like an afterthought. “It’s ok. You don’t have to be shameful about the past.”

Chris looked to the large gun that now lay a foot away from him on the table.

“I just need to know,” John said. “Can you forgive me?”

Chris said nothing, just looked away. He looked back to John and then at the gun. John casually picked it up and placed it on the table on his other side.

The land that seemed cruel during the day had become somewhat magical at night, for all the stars in the universe had settled above Chris’s head. But they were not just above him, for as he walked through the wilderness, all around him, they shimmered. The stars in the sky were somehow being superimposed over the landscape—there were thousands of them, maybe millions—fireflies! He had seen them once before on a cleanup detail outside Beaufort, South Carolina.

“They’re amazing!” he exclaimed to Brenda and John, slow-dancing beside the bonfire in the clearing below, the lights from the boombox twinkling with the beat, the fireflies in the distance behind them, eclipsed by the fire. They turned to Chris clutching the towel around his waist.

“Fireflies!” he exclaimed.

“They’re fairies,” John said.

“No,” Brenda said, casting a maniacal stare at Chris. “They’re witches.”

Chris slowly removed the towel and put it on the back of a chair. He caught Brenda looking at him. She turned away, and he thought of his mother.

“They’re just fireflies,” Chris said, “nothing good or bad.”

“What’s natural,” John said to the two, who were much younger than him, with a fatherly tone in his voice, “always becomes evil.”

“John,” Chris said. No “father” yet. “Do you regret anything?”

“How do you mean?” John said, quickening his lead with Brenda, them now moving in a slightly comical fashion.

“About the past,” Chris said.

“I’d like to think, son, the past is the past.”

“Then how do we learn anything?” Chris replied. “If we go through life simply saying, ‘The past is the past and I regret nothing,’ then don’t we keep making the same mistakes?”

Brenda looked to Chris, then to the stars above. He could tell she didn’t like the subject, and tried to change it.

“Wow!” she said, “Look how clear it is tonight!”

“My!” John replied, opening his embrace to the heavens.

The wind shifted the smoke, and John maneuvered Brenda to the other side of the fire. It was starting to lose its awkwardness, seeing this man, his father, naked. And standing there naked was feeling normal to him also, even though Brenda was still

clothed. But now he was imaging her naked, and what once seemed wrong, became quite natural. He wanted to say to her, “That’s not fair. You should be naked too!”

Instead, “It’s funny,” he said. “We spend our entire lives surrounded by these people, these humans, and only see a small part of them.”

“You’re very wise, son.”

“Well,” Chris said, stepping into the light, “I’ve had a lot of time to think.”

The fire dwindled to an ashy aftermath. Brenda had gone to bed and the men stood unclothed in the firelight. Chris, having never had a father, wasn’t sure what fathers and sons usually talked about. He was sure that John, having never had a son, felt the same; so Chris told him about his mother. The old man seemed to listen, but Chris wanted to see his face, to see the words enter his brain, to see him squirm. Chris felt nearly wicked standing naked in the firelight. He stopped talking and stared into the fire, imagined he could see God. He had often seen things that weren’t right, faces on the ceiling of his cell, demons in the patterns. “Maybe then,” he thought, “if I could look into the fire and see what only prophets see, I could forgive all.” He threw a stick on the inferno, smelt it burn and felt the heat on his face, watched the sparks flurry into the air. He heard the voice again. It was the voice he had often heard. Sometimes it whispered and sometimes it screamed. He had managed to keep it a secret. No one, not even his dead mother, not even pastor Virgil, the pastor he let touch him, knew about it. Sometimes it told the future, told him about The End, how he was the Second Coming and how he should tell the world. But then the voice, that just sung soothing droplets of honey in ear, did an about-face.

He fell back to his chair.

“Father,” he said. The word expelled from his mouth like a sour grape. “Tell me about the past.”

The stranger, his father, who now sat oblique to him, his testicles spilling over the edge of the dirty white lawn chair, the dark foreskin of his penis expanding over a darker hidden center, turned to him. Chris looked down at his own, and then back to his father’s. His, unlike his father’s, was cut to be seen. Chris had once imagined, looking at the other boys in the shower, that long ago some rabbi decided it couldn’t be trusted, that it had to be seen, that something as dangerous as a cock should be brought into the light as much as possible. Oddly enough, he felt it was a small gap between them, that maybe, as ridiculous as it seemed, they would have more to talk about if that tiny piece of skin was still around his head.

“Which past?”

“About—” He was going to say, “About my mother.” But what would *he* know about *his* mother? “What do you mean, ‘Which past?’ ”

“Truth or lie?”

“Truth!” Chris exclaimed. But the truth was hidden beneath a fold of foreskin; the lie was that it could be revealed and his father could be trusted; the ultimate truth—*your father’s hard cock!*

The dark spot passed and now Chris was looking up at Brenda. He reached down to cover himself, only to find he had already been covered.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she said. “I found them in your suitcase.”

She was sitting on the floor in the dim lamp light and he was lying on the living room couch. He didn't realize how young she was till now, till her face was two feet from his.

"He was different when we met," she said, "much more inhibited. We've never gone out much. Hell, I can't even take him to the supermarket without him freaking out. He just wants to drink and shoot his guns, stay naked all day down at that fence."

Chris sat up when he realized what she was doing, that she was "opening up" to him. It was something women did, so he had heard. His mother had never opened up to him; there wasn't enough time for that stuff.

He wondered, "Where's my father?" was about to ask when Brenda stopped talking, but she didn't.

"It would be great, you know, if he were…" she paused and looked to the side, "younger, yeah…it would different, I guess. But, that's not why we married. I love him, and love has nothing to do with…all that…you know…stuff."

"Stuff" meant "sex," he surmised.

"You're right," he said. "Love is love."

"God is love,' she said, as she rubbed the solitary dog tag around her neck.

"Yes, God is love," he agreed.

He recognized by that orange smudge that it was the one he returned to his father five years ago on a wet August morning; Lucy, his half-sister, on her stomach in the grass, looking up at him with tears in her eyes. In the visitor's lounge at the detention center she told him about her shattered family, that when her father betrayed her mother that night, he betrayed all of them.

“What was it like?” he asked Lucy.

Lucy revolted at the question, looked to the guard on the other side of the glass door.

“What?”

“Families,” he said. “What’re they like?”

Chris relived the conversation as Brenda opened up, nodding with Brenda’s every lowered intonation, yet seeing Lucy’s deep-red halo in place of Brenda’s dimly-lit, yet deeply blonde, aura, how Lucy shuddered when she said, “Well, I can’t…no…it’s too painful. It’s like…death!” she said, staring into him as she spoke “…it’s like…she’s the walking dead,” when talking about her mother. “She isn’t the same person. When she looks at my sisters and I, she’s no longer looking at us, but at the living ghost of our father. I feel dead,” she said, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Death,” he whispered to her, leaning into her as he spoke, getting attention from the armed guard. He was going to tell her about the voice in his head, his dead mother waking him in the middle of the night, but thought not; she would tell somebody and would never get out of there. He knew about death, real death. The voice was death. He had come to the realization that, because he was a bastard (a word once used by his own mother), he was born into death; death had always been there, in that empty space, the father that never was, that was now, nothing more than the voice of death.

Instead he said, “Don’t tell me the bad things, only the good.” Now Chris was the therapist. “Lucy, tell me a happy story. Tell me a happy family story.”

She told him about Aurora.

*

Even though lots of other cats looked just like Aurora, Aurora was special. Lucy touched her and no one else, and Lucy believed her touch was special.

One time, she slipped through the front door with Aurora in her arms. The vacuum cleaner startled them; Aurora struggled against Lucy's grip. When Daddy was home, he lay on the couch all day watching old war movies, and at night, when it was time to go to sleep, when Lucy lay awake in her bed, lights flashed and planes crashed, but during the day, when Daddy was away, the sounds were replaced by the sound of an angry vacuum cleaner, and the soldier was Mommy.

Mommy stopped vacuuming and walked through the kitchen. She turned on the faucet and looked to Lucy standing in the doorway. Since Mommy had told her she was going to be a big sister, Aurora was "outlawed" from the house.

"Cats are bad for Mommy and the baby," she told her. "They carry germs."

"Aurora's special!"

"No, Lucy, all animals carry bacteria."

"Why?"

" 'Cause they eat animals and animals carry bacteria."

"But we're animals, aren't we?"

"Well, yes and no."

"But we hurt like them."

"But we can help ourselves."

"But we eat animals, like animals do."

"But, darling, we're capable of much more than a simple animal."

“Then, Mommy, why can’t we let Aurora into our humble home?”

Mommy laughed, then dried her hands and told Lucy, with authority in her voice, “Leave the cat on the porch.”

Lucy did so, and before Mommy hugged her, Mommy pulled away and told her to wash her hands.

As Lucy washed she asked, “Will Daddy be home for dinner?”

Mommy said, yes, and hugged her tighter and tighter.

And all Lucy could think about was her wet hands and how fur got messy when it was wet.

The next day Daddy brought home a big black dog. A “Doberman Pincher” was what he called it.

“It’s scary,” Lucy said.

“I agree,” Mommy said.

Lucy asked, peeking from behind Mommy’s leg, “Where’d it come from?”

“It’s a gift,” he said, “for being such an excellent drill sergeant.”

“What’s its name?” Lucy asked,

“It’s a girl and her name is Satan.”

“Now, Daddy,” Mommy interjected, “surely we can change that.”

“Oh, Mommy, she’s been taken care of.”

“Not that, the name. I don’t think it’s appropriate for the little one here.”

“I didn’t name her. What right would I have to change it? Besides, it doesn’t mean anything. It’s just a name like any other. Like Lucy or John.”

John insisted John Jr. would be the baby's name. Mommy said it wasn't, and that no, it would be Emily.

Late that evening clouds black and heavy with rain lost and discovered the full yellow moon. Lucy lay in bed enjoying the aroma of impending downpour when she heard what sounded like a wolf on the *Late Show* horror movie, a movie she wasn't allowed to watch. She loved the smell of rain and the breeze that cut short the humidity. It was the perfect time to crawl out of the window and search for Aurora. Even though the likelihood of a flood was possible, for there had been a small flood every Friday for the last month, she had to find Aurora and protect her, not just from the rain, but from that black beast Daddy brought home from work. So with no shoes, nothing on but *Wonder Woman* panties and a long sleep shirt – a kitten joyfully sunbathing on the front – she jumped out of her bedroom window into cool, moist dirt.

She often imagined the bushes surrounding the duplex allowed safe haven from the brutalities of Parris Island. Usually, if she simply explored the area, she would find Aurora curled up under a bush in a smooth patch of dirt, but with the wind throwing about dirt and mist-laden leaves, she might have taken shelter elsewhere: under the house; under a car; or, God forbid, in the shed in the backyard near where that dreadful animal was now living. She had to do something, but she didn't know what. She couldn't ask Mommy or Daddy because then they would find out what she had been doing all this time. And how would she even get back there? She couldn't go through the house: the TV was still on. She couldn't go through the fence: Daddy had it locked-up really

tight. And then it occurred to her: *I'll go over the house!* It was possible. She had climbed the tree before, and the roof *was* pretty low.

Much to the fear and horror of Mommy, Lucy had become quite an expert tree climber, and in just three quick swoops, she was level with their bedroom window. Mommy liked looking at all the different kinds of birds that made the tree their home. And there was some talking real low, then louder, Mommy was pacing around the room holding her belly, yelling, "John! John!" But he wasn't answering.

"She's not in her room!" Daddy said, passing by the door. "I'm sure she's fine," he said, holding the suitcases that were packed weeks ago.

"But we have to find her!" Mommy said, squatting at the end of the bed. "We can't just leave."

"This area's secure," he assured her. "And the hospital's just down the street."

Lucy, with no shoes on and covered from head to toe with mud, walked into Parris Island Hospital clutching a frightened, shivering mass of grey fur. At three o'clock in the morning the nurse certainly did not notice the wet roof of a little girl's head as it passed a quarter of an inch above the triage counter.

"Look, Aurora, that man hurt his arm," whispering secretively to the distressed animal, while showing her the few unfortunate individuals who happened to be at the hospital at such an early hour, getting at least a couple of curious smiles in the process.

The private holding his arm approached. "Are you lost?" he asked, squatting down to her level.

She wasn't sure what to say. "I want my Daddy and I'm cold," was all. He guided her over to the counter, scooped her up with one arm and sat her down eye-level with the nurse. The cat growled and rebelled against the little girl's stranglehold.

The nurse sat back and her face went flat, the look her mother would no doubt give her if she walked into the living room in such a state. Again, "Daddy" was the answer.

"What's your Daddy's name?" she asked, her face popping back to life.

"John," was the reply.

"John what?"

"*Wahhrrr*en," Lucy said, a yawn extending the first syllable.

"And how do you spell that?"

The nurse was about to pull out a blank sheet of paper and give the little girl a pen, when another nurse appeared behind the other, and said, with deflated lips, "Little girl! You can't have that filthy animal in here!"

Lucy, reaffirming her grasp on the animal, leapt from the counter and sprinted through the door, below the arm of another unfortunate, incoming soldier.

And there was some cigarette smoke….the thick sound of Daddy's voice….a woman giggling way off at the end of the platform up under the canopy. It was too dark to see…a man with Daddy's voice…a woman giggling like a little girl, blowing smoke…man and woman became as one in the dark, but then were two again: one man, one woman, both staring at Lucy holding an angry feline in a certain grip, Lucy letting go of comprehension with an uncertain stare.

"Daddy?"

“Lucy!” he said, walking out of the dark and into the light. “Lucy,” kneeling down to her level, “Don’t you know we’ve been worried about you? And…what’ve you been doing!”

“Where’s Mommy?”

“Upstairs. Lucy, we can’t take Aurora with us.”

He called her by her name and not “that cat,” and suddenly, she was scared. She began to whimper and cry which just made her tired eyes burn.

Lucy awoke several hours later with her hair draped across her face. The smell of strawberry shampoo didn’t make her take pause and ask how she had gotten there, only crossed her arms over her stomach as to grasp for a phantom infant, sat up quickly and looked around the room. The blanket began to move where she had thrown it back.

“Aurora?” She pulled back the blanket and sure enough, clean and soft.

“Awake?” Daddy spoke from the doorway.

As he approached she created a protective arch over the animal.

“Are you taking her away?”

“No.” And then, “Lucy!” he said. “How’d you like to meet someone new?”

“Is it that girl?”

“Lucy. No, not her. She’s just a friend from work.” He looked down at the cat and then back to his daughter. “You see, Lucy, she was a secret friend.” He knelt down, placed one hand on her head, placed the other on the head of the animal – fingered the cat’s ear while staring intently at his first born child. “We all need secret friends, just like Aurora here is your secret friend. Understand?”

She nodded yes.

“Let’s make a deal. I won’t tell Momma about your secret friend, and you won’t tell Momma about mine. Is that a deal?”

Again, with a big smile, she nodded yes.

“Ok!” clapping his hands as he stood. “Put some clothes on and let’s get Momma.”

Lucy placed the flowers beside the bed, looked down at the tiny pink thing latched to her mother’s breast, and suddenly, and with great clarity, she understood—she was far more precious than any cat—she was far better than unique.

“She looks just like me!”

Mommy elevated the bed.

“Lucy, lay out your arms.”

She did so, and Mommy confidently placed her delicate cargo in Lucy’s arms.

Brenda stopped talking when Chris let out a gaping, face-splitting yawn. He didn’t want to be rude, but it was getting late, and this situation was starting to seem a little awkward.

“Where is he?” he asked.

“He’s…asleep.”

He judged by her pause that “asleep” meant “passed out.”

He lay back on the couch, and Brenda, his…he couldn’t think of it…stepmother? But that wasn’t right. She couldn’t have been more than ten years older than him. What

was she doing with this old man? “Women are strange,” he thought. He pretended to sleep while Brenda began to yawn.

He waited till she went to sleep, till the house was perfectly silent, and took off the underwear Brenda had somehow, without him knowing, put on him, and walked through the living room to the sliding door in the kitchen; he silently slid open the door and stepped outside, with only his flip-flops to protect him from the elements of nature. As he walked along the side of the house he felt the warm breeze on his exposed body, felt every hair be run through with nature. He placed his palms on the side of the house, felt the warmth of the house. He walked along the side of the house which was not shaped like a house at all, but was more of a fortress. “Certainly,” he thought, “not all Texans build fortresses out in the middle of nowhere with 18 inch thick walls.” But soon he discovered that the house was not entirely impenetrable, for when he got to their bedroom window, it was easy to lift open and crawl through. “Ironic,” he thought. And there Brenda and his father lay, she fully clothed, and he, again, completely naked, laying on his side with his goods hanging over the edge. Chris stooped down to get a closer look at them. He saw a faint glimmer under the bed, looked closer and it was very large knife, and behind that, a very large shotgun. Chris sat Indian style and began to pray. Again, his thoughts returned to Lucy, to her “happy family story,” then to the second time she visited him and the request, not to tell a happy story, but to tell a sad story.

Lucy enjoyed the secret. It was a gift she could hold over her little sister—now four-years-old and trying to respect big sis’s request and not yank Aurora by the tail; and

once Daddy's side of the deal was included, Aurora became sacred: a holy word only Lucy knew, that upon utterance, evoked spirits the way spells did in fairy-tale movies. No one knew the word except for Emily, and Emily spoke the word with a mouth full of marbles, "A-ror-ror." Lucy spoke it clearly—the soft, ashen back of the animal writhing from the attention. Aurora was much more than a cat, but a spirit only Lucy evoked, that Emily had touched and had experienced as something, well, not entirely ordinary. But Emily was also sacred, not a secret word, but a simple extension of Lucy, proof that she was important enough to be seen in another. Lucy was the sun in the sky, the center of everything, and with a word she held the universe together. "Aurora," she said, touching all with a word. "Aurora," she said. She could love all with a word, if everyone could touch something as soft as Aurora, all would know love.

But soon, everything would change. Enamored with the boy next door, Lucy ventured out alone for the first time since Emily was born. The day before, she had the unusual experience of watching him hosed down, completely naked, in the front lawn by his enormous father; the Marine drilled his son like infantry. She had never seen a man in his natural state before, so the abusive temperament of the scene was lessened by this lesson in anatomy, by his nearly masculine body, the man behind the boy, standing arrow straight as his father yelled something inaudible to him, some insult no doubt, some demeaning phrase that would limit him, that would ground him. He was grounded before her eyes; the mysteries of the world were revealed.

She even left part of her behind. *What? There's that little redheaded girl without her shadow?* she imagined the neighbors saying as she skipped across the lawn, wearing of all things—a dress! And Aurora, like all cats, was bound to another world,

simply not one of budding young women, but perhaps of four-year-old girls. But no one noticed, not even Mom, who was pregnant again and devoting more time than usual to her yoga, spending at least an hour and a half every weekend exercising and meditating. The rule posted on the refrigerator: ON SUNDAYS NO ONE IS TO BOTHER ME FROM ONE TO TWO-THIRTY. This, since Daddy was gone Sundays, put Emily specifically under the guidance of her big sister. But not today. Lunch was over and Mom went to her room. Lucy had spent the day watching the next door driveway. *They must be at church*. *Normal families go to church, but not mine!* She resented having a father who cringed every time that word was spoken.

The dress felt like new skin as it swayed with her twelve-year-old body, flowing over the remaining daisies surrounding the next door porch, through which not just two weeks ago, she had led Emily in a stomping match. Two knocks should do. Don't want to seem too eager. Nothing happened, and then she knocked again, a little louder this time. The giant answered the door. She wasn't frightened, for she had come to expect only the most kindness. Her fragile female presence was something to be honored in a place of men, on this military island. He looked past her and out to the road. She turned around to see if anyone was behind her. No one was there, so she spoke up.

"Excuse me, mister, I was wondering if your little boy, that little brown-headed boy, would like to come to my birthday party next weekend. There's gonna be a piñata…"

"Whoa! How 'bout tellin' me your name?"

"I'm Lucy, and this is…" Again, she looked behind. It was a reflex: the assumption her little sister was standing behind her, but thankfully, she wasn't.

"Are you expectin' someone?" Again: out to the street. "I know who. *You* wanna talk to my boy. Jake!" he yelled to the empty living room. Then he turned away, mumbling something to the tune of, "That's my boy."

Then another little boy came out. She stood nervously on the porch when he walked slowly through the living room. This little boy was entirely way too clean to be the same boy; his hair slicked over to one side; starched white dress shirt; slacks perfectly creased down the center of each leg; shiny black dress shoes on.

"Who are *you?*" he said, his face on the edge between bewilderment and disgust.

"I'm Lucy, and I was wondering if you'd like to come to my birthday party."

Then he looked past her, and his face crossed the line and became agitated.

"What's *that?*" He pointed indignantly to her left shoulder.

She turned to the side expecting to see a monster, but when she turned, nothing was there.

"Made you look!"

Then she realized that this was indeed the same boy, and that new little boy who answered the door, that boy who only *seemed* mature, would have been better than this child in men's clothing.

That was the end of the conversation, for after his bold exclamation he was distracted by a shiny object sticking out of the top soil of the plantless pot beside the door, ripped it out of its shallow grave and fell into the living room, slamming the door behind him.

It was an emotion she had never felt before. A hole had opened through her torso and her heart seemed to be squeezing out the back, falling onto the porch where she slipped and stumbled before running back to her house.

She didn't want to disturb Mom. It was only a quarter to two and she was most likely in "deep meditation." She passed by the door that was kept open in case of emergency, and there she sat in "lotus position" with the look of self-satisfaction on her face. She thought about her name and how she felt anything but lucid at the moment. Her name, Lucy: Mother told her it was from her favorite word, lucidity, that when she named her she wanted something pure, something exact, her simple, true, Lucy. Years later, her father would tell her a different story, that it was from the Bible, and not after a woman of virtue, but from Satan himself, that after fingering through the Bible one day, and placing her finger at random on the first name she came upon, in Genesis of all places, Satan was the name. "I know now," her father would tell her, "it was an omen." But Satan became Lucifer; Lucifer became lucidity; and lucidity, Lucy. "Lucifer," he would say to his 18-year-old daughter, heartbroken, "most beautiful before you betrayed me." Now, she didn't want to disappoint her mother. She didn't want to do what she felt like doing which was falling down beside her mother, and letting loose her heavy heart.

She didn't want her little sister to see her that way, to see her helpless. She watched her through the cracked-open door playfully putting hats on sleeping Aurora. And then she felt what seemed like a wet towel being rung out in the pit of her stomach. At one end was her little sister's eager little hand, twisting violently and unaware of her strength, innocence being the only excuse to rationalize it; on the other end was her mother, again, twisting violently, but it was not innocence, and to call it "lucid" didn't fit

either. Then what was it? Something had to give. Someone had to be shown the light. So she went into her bedroom and grabbed Aurora, took Emily by the hand and the three went down the hallway to Mother's room.

"See, Mom!" she said, dropping the cat on the floor before her. "I have a secret and her name is Aurora."

"Lucy," her mother said, eyes now open and eager. "*What* are you doing?"

"I want you to know that *I* have a secret, and I want Emily to see—"

"Lucy-baby, you know Aurora is no secret. She is more than welcome in our home, just as long as you clean up after her." She uncrossed her legs and stood up, sat on the edge of the bed, looked down at her in that calm, collected way Lucy had come to expect. "Now, what's *really* bothering you?"

"Nothing. I just want Emily to see you with your eyes open." Lucy looked to the child rubbing her face on the animal's belly. "I want you to know that I have a secret, and so does Dad."

"A secret," she said, with a slight chuckle. She lay back and rested her chin on her fingertips, a look of faultless understanding on her face.

"Daddy has a secret friend."

"What?"

"That's where he goes Sundays. We made a deal: I wouldn't tell you about his secret friend, and he wouldn't tell you about mine. *That* was the deal."

"Lucy, you know as well as I do, Daddy works Sundays, has for years—" And then she stopped, looked down at the cat, at Emily, now petting the cat.

Lucy turned to the door. She didn't call for Emily, didn't retrieve the feline. Her face went white and not a freckle gave forth the impression of warmth as she turned and said, "She's not my cat anymore."

The old man opened his eyes and reached for the knife, and before Chris knew it, he was on his back with an icy blade against his throat. John was muttering something, but Chris couldn't hear it. Chris heard the voice. He didn't want to listen to that either. He wanted to go somewhere warm, somewhere safe. He wanted to be with Lucy, so he imagined her voice, soft and warm like that cat he heard so much about. When she told him what John was doing that night almost five years ago, she told him the truth of his very existence.

The children were in bed, and Lucy, officially a teenager with her own room, was talking on the phone with her boyfriend, Chase. Her parents didn't know about Chase, and Lucy had been careful to keep him a secret, which was easy, for Dad worked a lot and Mom was always preoccupied with Jill and Emily. At thirteen, she had already lost her virginity; something that would also remain a secret. Chase was nearly eighteen and was already frequenting college parties in Beaufort. She had been to one already, had smoked pot and had gotten drunk there for the first time. The house was silent, so she assumed her parents were asleep. Chase drove up in his white Chevy truck, and Lucy, as she had done dozens of times in the past,—this time, not to search for a cat, but to be with her secret boyfriend,—crept away in the night.

Hours later, when Chase dropped her off, Satan barked at the gate, dew drops collected in grass she devastated with her sneakers – the wet shoes and wet socks she was stooping down to remove when she felt a violent tug on the back of her head – found herself being dragged through the lawn, could only scream for help as she watched Joyce Jones, a family friend, the wife of her father's best friend, looking in horror at the scene from the end of the sidewalk; and all Lucy could do was scream; it was a scream that would wake everyone within a block, provoke someone, or many, to call the MP who would arrive a moment before it happened; and a moment before the MP arrived, Denise, Lucy's mother, came to her rescue. John simply dragged both through the grass. Then all heard the voice. When John turned to see the boy, it was no more than a .22, but the bullet entered his neck, and all John could do was clutch his throat and fall to his knees.

From a juvenile detention center Chris told Lucy his sad story: about his mother who was a virgin and barely eighteen at the time, was forced to move out when she refused to get an abortion, was called a whore by her own father and became one on the streets of Brooklyn; how his mother did the best she could to care for him. On that first visit, he would tell Lucy about his mother's addiction to heroin, and about her over-dose. He would tell her, "I blame your father for everything," for his own heroin addiction, his turn to child prostitution to support his habit, and for the disease he had, what doctors were calling HIV.

"My regret," he said, "my only regret, is I didn't shoot myself instead."

*

"Tell me everything," he said to this man, the father that wasn't there, was simply, someplace else, maybe hidden. "Say it!"

John told his son about the leave he took 18 years ago in New York City, about spotting his mother in a crowd, following her for three blocks, till…. Chris heard the voice again, it was trying to speak over his father's, for what his father was saying was unspeakable. But the voice, that was typically no more than a barely audible whisper, became clear, and yes, the voice was now his father's; and what once seemed as incomprehensible as death, the tragedy that was his life, was as clear as day.

Chris stood and looked down at his father. This man was no devil, just a frightened little man, as naked as a new born babe. Chris put out his hand, and said, "I forgive."

Too Close To Home

I walk through the door and the house smells like that freshly-mopped-kitchen-floor smell. My wife has got all the notebooks I had scattered on the floor neatly laid flat at perfect 90-degree angles on the living room coffee table. She sits on the couch messing with an empty picture frame, and whatever she has in mind as far as filling the frame, doesn't concern me until I see the picture of my father and me on graduation day in her hand.

My father and I both graduated from college on the same day. He flew up here to be at mine even though it meant missing his own. We stood there at that one moment in time, and judging by the awkward looks on our faces, it may have been the longest.

I tell her, "I don't want to see that picture in a frame."

"What picture do you want in the frame?" she asks as she adjusts it by its flat cardboard foot.

I tell her, "I don't want to see any pictures in that frame. Pictures aren't meant to be seen all the time. They're meant to be stuffed away in a book and forgotten about, and when you stumble across that book by accident, and decide to look at them, you get a feeling of nostalgia and sadness. Yeah, that's what pictures are for—sadness. Otherwise, they're just selfish things."

"Selfish?" she says.

"Yeah, I don't want them around. They're pathetic. They don't mean anything. They can't substitute for the real thing. Like those," I say pointing at the bookshelf beside the couch. Three little pictures surround a larger one. The three little ones are of the three children I've never met, and the larger one is of a mother and father I've never

met. They're my wife's relatives, and she hasn't seen them since we've been together, almost ten years now. This family paid for that memory. They paid someone who didn't know anything about them, to take those phony pictures.

"But that's my sister and her family," she says.

"So what," I tell her. "I've never met them. For the six years we've been together, never once have they bothered to visit us."

"Well, they have small children and that makes it difficult."

"They visited your father last summer and he lives 60 miles from here. They could've visited."

"But they're my family," she says again.

"It just seems artificial and dishonest. And I don't want their lying faces staring at me."

My mother keeps bugging us to get some "Good professional pictures" taken, but I won't do it.

"But we have pictures of your family up," she says. I briefly look around the room. All the walls are bare. The only other pictures I see are the three tiny ones on the bottom shelf.

"It's just my niece and my nephews," I tell her. "We know them. They're great kids. Hell, they're the only honest people we know." There's a picture of my sister and her husband stuffed away somewhere.

"Alright," she says. She gets up from the couch and begins to collect all the pictures of her family.

When she gets to her grandparents, I say, “I don’t want you to put your grandparents away.”

“Why not?” she replies

“I don’t know. I guess because they’re dead.”

“I guess the same goes for Rose?” she says. And I felt her stab me with the words, but it was through a hole that was already there. I turn around quick, as if I could protect that vulnerable spot. A large picture of a young woman looks up at me from the window sill. My mother gave it to me to remind me. As if I needed to be reminded. The picture looks too big for that thin wooden frame. Its edges bend beneath the thick clear glass. I want to turn the picture over and make it disappear. The beauty of youth and the meaningless of death preserved in a fragile frame. A portable tombstone that reflects my life and my death and challenges me not to look away, that challenges me to grow tired with pain.

My wife embraces me from behind.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her.

“I know.”

PART III

POETRY

On Religion

The child mirrors the old woman's prayer,

as one hand mirrors the other.

With a word the priest touches nothing,

nothing but the reflection.

The reflection is wordless,

the prayer, a wondering question.

Answers are simple.

Answers are fingertips.

Sun

Sunlight's broken by shop canopies

then mended again.

My reflection in a shop window—

mirrored glasses poised upon an English nose,

a Spaniard with a thick black beard, black eyes

almond-shaped—the eyes of the native woman that made me.

On the square,

I'm a Child of Sun.

Everything's gone,

buildings, cars and people, and I stand on the altar.

But I've merely the splinter of a soul,

reflected within a broken sun.

Noise

I’m also a Child of Noise.

Noise fills the void.

I go to the coffee shop to read,

where it’s so loud, I can’t hear a solitary noise.

I would love, more than anything, for every noise to blend into one solid, impenetrable, noise.

Silence

Silence is a moment between movements,

when the orchestra stops—

Some, unreligious,

clap in sin.

Some sit still knowing silence is *religio*—

and speech is derisive,

and to fill the void with sound,

with the syncopated pounding of flesh,

is a word that touch no one.

During the day,

silence is a terrorist.

It rushes the hill,

for it wants back Holy Land.

It has nothing to lose, for all is lost,

to endless noise.

At night, silence is an anxious lover.

It survived the insurgency.

and at four in the morning,

it embraces me,

but now it’s dark.

Darkness

And now I’m a Child of Darkness;

And now I’m alone;

And now I’m American.

American

American is a category that wanes between what's general and what's specific.

My kingdom is American,

but my genus, is not out of nothing—

Child of Sun—Child of Darkness.

At times, I'm proud of my American half.

I think about the great gathering

—the voyage West,

from the cradle in the Fertile Crescent,

to this adulthood of democracy.

But my East wants to destroy my West.

It wants silence.

On The Square

I stay as silent as the sun,

where all light is broken,

behind mirrored glasses;

and all explorers who trespass on my frontier,

will be met with nothing,

but a reflection.

Heavy Like Fruit

Part I

The sun goes down over the Pacific and millions of leaves turn west
to absorb the day's remaining light.

The wine-keeper listens to the creak of wood on wood while
his chair rocks back and forth,

slowly moving closer and closer
to the edge of the patio.

Before the first fruit falls,
the Sun Song will play to the West:

> Can I eat the peach?
> The branch is out of reach.
> Is the core rancid,
> Or moist inside her fertile crescent?

The song frightens her—
it's a most terrible fate.

The rhythm tastes poorly,

with her Aquinas date.

The Sun Song is a wandering one,

circling the center of a biblical grove,

where all men are reapers,

and all women are reaped.

Heavy Like Fruit

Part II

A péche is a sin,

a cœure is a heart,

and King George played his part—

a hard core verses a French fleet.

And Dick is in the Bush—

push push push.

The core is missing—

and *We are hollow*, man!

And Bushes don’t talk—

they burn burn burn.

The core is missing,

lost beneath that wickedly good tree,

and today’s Mary

is an antitheory—

like every man that sings of a self—

or every woman that sings of a wit—

an empty heart,

and a hollow pit.

And the troubadour’s song is a wandering one:

> Close all ports and devour your wealth.
>
> Sing nothing but the song of yourself.
>
> Regard not in simple similes—
>
> a tree is a tree is a tree is a tree.